'THE BEST SF MAGAZINE ON THE MARKET' SF REVU

mundane-sf special

interzone

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GEOFF RYMAN
JULIAN TODD
TRENT WALTERS
GUEST FICTION EDITORS

LAVIE TIDHAR
HOW TO MAKE PAPER AIRPLANES

CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO
ENDRA–FROM MEMORY

BILLIE AUL
THE HOUR IS GETTING LATE

R.R. ANGELL
REMOTE CONTROL

ÉLISABETH VONARBURG
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ANIL MENON
INTO THE NIGHT

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TALK IS CHEAP

CHRIS NURSE
FEATURED ARTIST

GREG EGAN
ALASTAIR REYNOLDS
INTERVIEWED

READERS' POLL
THE RESULTS

NEWS & REVIEWS
ANSIBLE LINK
BOOKS & FILMS



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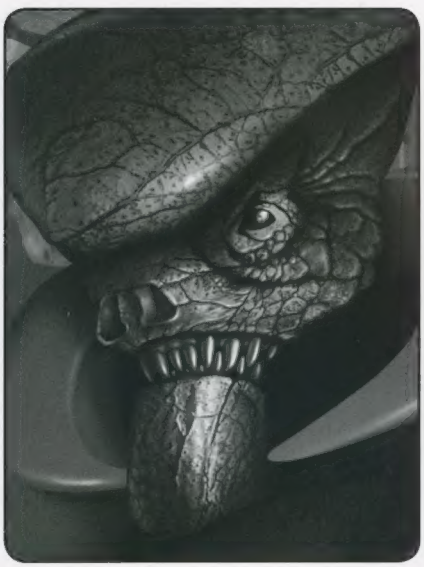
Africa
Karen Fishler
illustrated by Paul Drummond



The Ships Like Clouds, Risen By Their Rain
Jason Sanford
illustrated by Vincent Chong



Concession Girl
Suzanne Palmer
illustrated by Darren Winter



Little Lost Robot
Paul McAuley
illustrated by Paul Drummond



plus stories by
Chris Beckett • Jeremiah Tolbert • Jason Stoddard • Nina Allan
Aliette de Bodard • Eugie Foster • M.K. Hobson • Paul Tremblay
and others

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FEATURED ARTIST
CHRISTOPHER NURSE
BLACKENGINE.CO.UK



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Editors › David Mathew, Andy Cox, Jetse de Vries, Andrew Hedgecock, Liz Williams (editorial@ttapress.demon.co.uk) **Book Reviews Editor** › Paul Raven **Proofreader** › Peter Tennant **Advertising & Publicity** › Roy Gray (roy@ttapress.demon.co.uk) **Typewelping** › Andy Cox **E-edition (fictionwise.com)** › Pete Bullock **Website** › ttapress.com **Subscriptions** › The number on your mailing label refers to the final issue of your subscription. If it's due for renewal you'll see a reminder on the centre pages pullout. Please renew promptly. Thanks!



Welcome to our special Mundane-SF issue. Geoff Ryman introduces the stories a bit further on, giving us the space here to properly thank featured artist **Christopher Nurse**. The art for this issue needed to be done very quickly and as always Chris obliged, despite being busier than ever…

Chris's work developed from a childhood fascination with moving imagery. At an early age he made Super 8 films which generally starred Stop Motion animated toys and handmade sets. After leaving college Chris was quickly taken on by a major London illustration agency and worked for clients such as EMI, Digital Vision, BT and many major book and magazine publishing groups.

During his time as an illustrator Chris maintained his primary love of film and made numerous self-financed shorts. He also undertook freelance commissions and created highly stylised films and motion graphics works for a variety of clients. In 2005 he decided to focus on filmmaking, and was soon awarded a Screen Gems commission (one of the most prestigious short film schemes in Europe) for *Hydra*, a near future thriller, which you can watch on Chris's website (blackengine.co.uk). He's currently working on scripts for feature films *Winter* and *The Red Dawn*, and will soon start shooting his debut feature *Nocturne* as writer/director (nocturnethemovie.co.uk).

Chris lives and dreams in Cardiff with a Bull Terrier called Mabb and a Tribal Art collection that scares the shit out of visitors.



Langford and 'Mostly Armless' figure of Welsh legend

Terry Pratchett's donation of $1 million for Alzheimer's research ('Personally, I'd eat the arse out of a dead mole if it offered a fighting chance') was widely reported and inspired the 'Match It For Pratchett' fan initiative to equal this amount: see matchitforpratchett.org. Large sums have been raised.

As Others Research Us. 'I've always been a fan of H.G. Wells, the 19th/20th century British sci-fi author. You know, he's the guy who penned such classics as "The War of the Worlds," "The Time Machine" and my personal favorite, "1984."' (City editor, *Mohave Valley Daily News*) • Simon Drake (who?) on the passing of Arthur C. Clarke: 'I see his death as a good thing. […] I give credit to ACC, I even put his Three Laws of Robotics into the preface of my book Love Data, but it's time for a new generation to get into the public eye.' (*Times Online*)

Brian Aldiss is feeling 'full of energy' thanks to a new heart pacemaker.

Roald Dahl's name was conspicuously not bandied in a Birmingham radio quiz. *Elliott Webb:* 'Who wrote *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?' *Caller:* 'Was it H.G. Wells?' (BRMB)

Larry Niven is in the SIGMA sf writers' think tank which offers 'unconventional thinking' at US Homeland Security science/technology conferences. In March, *National Defense* magazine covered a recent Sigma panel's 'rambling, sometimes strident string of ideas […] Niven said a good way to help hospitals stem financial losses is to spread rumors in Spanish within the Latino community that emergency rooms are killing patients in order to harvest their organs for transplants.' *Niven:* 'The problem [of hospitals going broke] is hugely exaggerated by illegal aliens who aren't going to pay for anything anyway.' *Jerry Pournelle:* 'Do you know how politically incorrect you are?'

Patrick Stewart's Broadway role as Macbeth drew some highly relevant questions from *Newsweek*'s Nicki Gostin: 'When you're onstage, aren't you worried about weird Trekkie fans in the audience?' *PS:* 'Oh, come on, that's just a silly thing to say.' *NG:* 'But they are weird.' *PS:* 'How many do you know personally? You couldn't be more wrong. Here's the thing: if you say the fans are weird, that means there is something essentially weird about the show, and there is nothing weird about it. I'm very passionate when people like you snigger.' Of course *Newsweek* headlined this *Macbeth* interview 'Mr. Stewart Loves His Trekkies', with the photo caption 'Is that a Klingon I See?'

AWARDS WATCH

BSFA: Ian McDonald, *Brasyl* (novel); Ken MacLeod, 'Lighting Out' in *disLocations* (short); Andy Bigwood, *disLocations* cover 'Cracked World' (art); Brian Aldiss, *Non-Stop* (1958 anniversary award). • **Clarke Finalists:** Matthew de Abaitua, *The Red Men*; Stephen Baxter, *The H-Bomb Girl*; Sarah Hall, *The Carhullan Army*; Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts*; Ken MacLeod, *The Execution Channel*; Richard Morgan, *Black Man*. • **Hugo Finalists** (novel): Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*; Ian McDonald, *Brasyl*; Robert J. Sawyer, *Rollback*; John Scalzi, *The Last Colony*; Charles Stross, *Halting State*. Again there are *Doctor Who* episodes in Dramatic Presentation (short), and *Interzone* is up for Semiprozine. • **Philip K. Dick:** M. John Harrison, *Nova Swing*. • **Nebula Finalists** (novel): Jack McDevitt, *Odyssey*; Joe Haldeman, *The Accidental Time Machine*; Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*; Nalo Hopkinson, *The New Moon's Arms*; Tobias Buckell, *Ragamuffin*. • **SFWA Grand Master:** Michael Moorcock.

We Are Everywhere. You know sf has conquered the world when a net pundit announces: 'Barack Obama is the Democratic Party's Kwisatz Haderach.' (SnarkyBastards.com)

Magazine Scene. *Scheherezade*, after an 18-year run, has published its final issue.

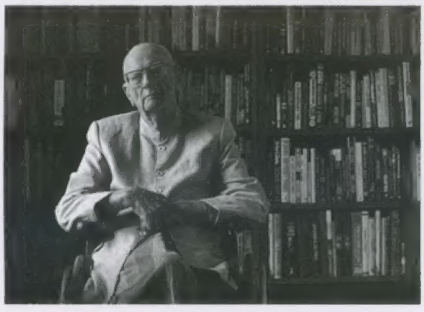
THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Eyeballs in the Sky. 'Matilda was lovely, but she had bright burning eyes that you could feel creep down your face and into your belly.' (Arthur N. Scarm, *The Werewolf vs Vampire Woman*, 1972) • **Relativity Dept.** 'It's the long accepted theory that a man who could travel faster than light could spin off this planet for a light year or two and return that much younger.' (Sam Merwin, Jr, *The Time Shifters*, 1971) • **Dept of Colourful Idiom.** 'Considering this horrid fact, he drained his vodka and soda and motioned to Mullarney *[the barman]* to shove up another sheep.' *(Ibid)*

R.I.P.

Jane Blackstock (1947–2008), former rights director and publisher at Gollancz, died of cancer on 3 March; she was 61.

Johnny Byrne (1935–2008), Irish-born writer and script editor best known in sf for 1975–6 work on *Space: 1999*, died on 3 April. He wrote five stories for *Science Fantasy* (1964–5) and three *Doctor Who* TV scripts.

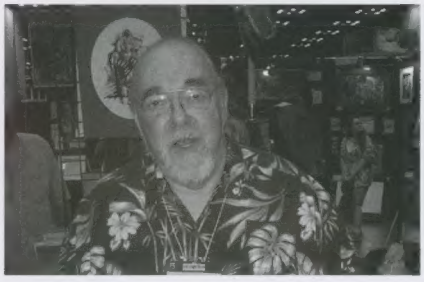


Sir Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008), UK-born sf and science author who for decades was genuinely world-famous, died in Sri Lanka on 18 March: he was 90. Some of his sf, notably *The City and the Stars* from 1956, still evokes that old sense of wonder for the most jaded fans. Tributes appeared everywhere. Despite colossal fame, Sir Arthur didn't forget his early roots as 'Ego' Clarke in 1940s/1950s British fandom. When Thog quoted him here in 2002, he replied with delight: 'Now I can die happy – finally made it to Masterclass!' Overhead, without any fuss…

Charlton Heston (1924–2008), US actor with famous sf roles in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *The Omega Man* (1971) and *Soylent Green* (1973), died on 5 April. He was 83.

Janet Kagan (1946–2008), US author whose 1988 novel *Hellspark* had a devoted following, and who won a Hugo for 'The Nutcracker Coup' (1992), died on 29 February.

Stephen Marlowe (1928–2008), US crime and supernatural novelist who published sf from 1950 to the early 1960s under his birth name Milton Lesser, died on 22 February; he was 79.



E. Gary Gygax (1938–2008), US game designer and fantasy novelist best known for his creation (with Dave Arneson) of the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game, died on 4 March aged 69. I liked the suggestion that fans should club together to build him a vast tomb full of the deadliest imaginable traps.

Anthony Minghella (1954–2008), UK scriptwriter and director who wrote and directed the ghost story *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1990), died unexpectedly on 18 March. He was 54.

Jody Scott (1923–2007), UK-born sf author who wrote *Passing For Human* (1977) and *I, Vampire* (1984), died on 24 December; she was 84.

Ken Slater (1917–2008), UK fan and book/magazine dealer who introduced so many of us to the joys of sf, died on 16 February. He was 90 in December and celebrated with a January party. Ken, a much-loved figure at conventions for many decades, is generally credited with restarting British fandom after World War II, setting an example to fanzine publishers with his *Operation Fantast* in 1947; he was a founding member of the BSFA in 1958.

MARTIN McGRATH WRITES: It was *very close*. The votes that decided it arrived on the last day of polling.

Gareth Lyn Powell's 'Ack-Ack Macaque' wins – it had the same aggregate score as Grace Dugan's 'Knowledge' but 'Ack-Ack Macaque' wins by virtue of a higher number of positive votes.

The most controversial stories were probably Hal Duncan's 'The Whenever at the City's Heart' and Rachel Swirsky's 'Heartstrung' – both received respectable positive votes ('Heartstrung' was in the top five of positive votes) but also the highest number of negative votes. 'Feelings of the Flesh' by Douglas Cohen also split opinions sharply.

This was the biggest turn out in the last three years.

Every story received at least two positive votes (that's the first time since I've been doing this that every story has had some positive votes).

Although the number of negative votes for stories did rise this year, the number of stories with overall negative aggregate scores fell for the third consecutive year.

Issue 211 received the highest aggregate score but the stories in issue 209 received both the highest number of positive and negative votes. On aggregate scores there wasn't much to choose between issues 209, 211 and 213 (perhaps, in a mirror-image of the Star Trek movies, a trend is developing where the odd numbered ones are the good ones?). Issue 208 was clearly the runt of the litter with readers – that might be because it's the oldest one, but that didn't seem to hold back issue 209.

The most popular piece of artwork was Kenn Brown's cover of issue 213 ('Metal Dragon Year').

Number of votes for artwork still lags behind the stories, but took a considerable jump forward this year. The cover art continues to dominate things – only Kenn Brown's cover of issue 208 isn't at the top of the poll.

Thanks once again to Martin and congratulations to the winners and runners up in both categories. The top twenty stories and top seven artworks are listed opposite. Thanks to everyone who voted and sent in comments. Until the next poll please continue to make use of the forum!

Philip Eagle: Favourites: Jason Stoddard's 'Softly Shining in the Forbidden Dark' – I want to apologise to Stoddard for accusing him of being a vulgar libertarian last year, this story was a really good examination of the alien mind with a thought-provoking examination of the potential paradoxical solipsism of the completely hive-minded species. Paul Meloy's 'Islington Crocodiles' – gripping, well-observed urban fantasy noir, which made me want to hunt out other stories in the same universe. Reminded me of a cross between John Harvey and Neil Gaiman. Hal Duncan's 'The Whenever at the City's Heart' – I'm just a sucker for this kind of thing. Carlos Hernandez's 'Exvisible' – a nice balance between character revelation and plausible future technology, quite beautiful. SINGLE BEST OF YEAR, if I had to pick one. Aliette de Bodard's 'Deer Flight' and 'The Lost Xuyan Bride' – a very promising IZ discovery this year. I'm impressed by how good both of these are and by how different they are in genre – one a near-fairy tale fantasy and the other an alternate history PI story. I like her characterisation and lack of simplistic moralism, especially in the second story which could have headed into unpleasant Yellow Peril territory had it been at all schematic. Benjamin Rosenbaum's 'Molly and the Red Hat' – deliberate fantasy writing for very young children is very difficult to make readable to an adult. This one managed it excellently.

Potential vote: I'd like to make a conditional vote for 'A Handful of Pearls' by Beth Bernobich. I personally didn't think it was very good, but I have a feeling that you'll get some negative votes on the grounds that the subject matter Shouldn't Be In SF, and I'd like to register my opposition to any such opinion.

Negative votes: I wasn't fond of Gareth Lyn Powell's 'Ack-Ack Macaque', which seemed a threadbare tale of petty and unpleasant hipsters with a grafted on SF ending.

Liz Flannery: I'd like to register a positive vote for 'Ack-Ack Macaque' by Gareth Lyn Powell. I think his stuff is among the best I've read.

Duncan Harris: Gotta vote for Gareth Lyn Powell's 'Ack-Ack Macaque': a great title (and one I have great difficulty in spelling!) that isn't spoilt by a poor story. The personal becomes universal. Although how accurate the idea of a global brand becoming sentient and taking over is, I'm not sure… Wait! It's already happened, surely Ronald McDonald is the anti-pope…!

Susan Francis: My favourite story from last year is 'Metal Dragon Year' by Chris Roberson: a fascinating alt.history, which proves that you don't have to send your characters on a world tour in order to put a whole world on display, nor wipe out Europe in a cataclysm in order to have a diverse cast with no Europeans on-stage. Other ace stories: 'Deer Flight' by Aliette de Bodard; 'Knowledge' by Grace Dugan; 'Molly and the Red Hat' by Benjamin Rosenbaum; 'Tearing Down Tuesday' by Steven Francis Murphy; 'The Final Voyage of La Riaza' by Jayme Lynn Blaschke; 'The Sledge-maker's Daughter' by Alastair Reynolds; 'Where the Water Meets the Sky' by Jay Lake. Runners-up: 'Dada Jihad' by Will McIntosh; 'Odin's Spear' by Steve Bein; 'The Lost Xuyan Bride' by Aliette de Bodard; 'Winter' by Jamie Barras.

I haven't picked out anything I particularly hated, but there are quite a few depressing or dull stories. We live in depressing times, and our political and economic masters deserve to be pilloried, and there are some *good* political stories, but most of them are No Fun, and where IZ's 'downbeat' rep comes from. Although I've now got broadband, I don't think publishing things on the internet and calling them 'more of this issue' is fair. I suppose it wouldn't fit, but people who don't have net access also pay for the magazine. I hope it won't be a regular occurrence.

Piet Wenings: Issue 212 was the standout issue with three positive votes and one negative. Three stories less in my positive list, compared to 2006. Worse is that I've got two more bad karmas this year. This agrees with my general feel of a more bland year. Not much spicy stuff to get me really excited. 17 out of 34 were Karma. That means 50% of the stories got an OK. I'd rather have felt strongly about those stories. I certainly hope 2008 will bring the emotional roller coaster I'm looking for with *Interzone*. 'The Scent of their Arrival' by Mercurio D. Rivera already did it for me at the start of this year. I'm sure there's more to come! Thanks and see you next year.

2007 READERS' POLL › THE RESULTS

Robert Lawson: The stand out issue for me was 209 with five excellent stories and three stunning works of art, with Richard Marchand's illustration being worth the price of admission alone. The issue lagging the most behind this in terms of stories was 212, however I found this issue contained some of the strongest artwork of the year. My favourite story of the year was the quite brilliant 'Molly and the Red Hat' by Benjamin Rosenbaum, with special mentions for Hal Duncan's 'The Whenever At The City's Heart' and Alastair Reynolds' 'The Sledge-maker's Daughter'.

I love Warwick Fraser-Coombe's artwork. The illustrations that I really didn't like were both done by David Gentry. David's work in *Black Static* is simply awesome but his contributions to *Interzone* seemed to lack the brooding invention that makes his other work so challenging.

Thanks to all at TTA Press for your efforts – they are much appreciated in this corner of Barnsley.

Chris Geeson: Another great year's worth of stories. Tim Akers' 'Toke' was fantastic and gruesome and I liked the futuristic satire of Jason Stoddard's 'The Best of Your Life' and Carlos Hernandez's 'Exvisible'. Issue 213 was probably my overall favourite, with a great cover and illustrations (especially Paul Drummond's picture for 'The Lost Xuyan Bride'), as well as three of the stories I'm voting for. Looking forward to more great stories in 2008.

Stephen McMullin: I've only just begun my *Interzone* subscription, so I feel a little like a fraud voting in this, since issue 213 was my first. Nonetheless, I have to comment of Aliette de Bodard's excellent story 'The Lost Xuyan Bride', which was a most satisfying way to end an already impressive collection of stories. I loved the idea of a non-European dominated America – especially the fact that in this reality the indigenous population hadn't been entirely eradicated. I found myself wondering about the state of the rest of the world in this universe, which is suppose is evidence of a strong premise full of potential for story-mining. Also, I don't think there's ever a wrong time for a washed up, cynical private dick. I can't get enough of 'em, whether it's Philip Marlowe, John Constantine or, now, Jonathan Brooks. I'm hoping beyond hope that Ms de Bodard likes him too, to the extent that we'll see future stories featuring this character as well as the universe she's created.

Anyway, that's my two cents. I'm hugely glad *Interzone* exists, and I'm only sorry I didn't subscribe years ago. The folly of yoof.

Duncan Lawie: I think the best artistic work last year was the use of Douglas Sirois for the whole of issue 210, though this does seem rather predicated on the use of internal colour. For the later black and white issues, the artwork of Warwick Fraser-Coombe was noticeably the best. I also think the logo for *Interzone* in the last three issues is great – and using the vertical of the 't' on the cover to separate out a text panel is a great piece of design.

Non-fiction: As ever, I'm delighted by Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn. I enjoyed the short, taut Laser Fodder column too. I'm pretty neutral about the presence/absence of the Manga reviews, and found the PodZone less than inspiring – though I like Paul S. Jenkins' own review podcast, so am hopeful that the 'print remix' can find its voice. The Moorcock interview was great, and a standard to which all your interviews can aspire, though the others didn't feel like much more than author profiles – when they could be giving us more depth. Book reviews seemed functional rather than thorough – I look forward to seeing what Paul Raven does with this department.

When I started looking through last year's issues, I was rather dispirited – until I got to 210. I don't know whether the single artist approach gave a better feel or whether this was just a better collection of stories. Whilst I have no particular gripes with Jason Stoddard's work, it does seem to have rather too much presence in the magazine at present. I may be being a little unfair to both Michael Moorcock and Hal Duncan, in that I suspect that I enjoyed Moorcock's piece principally because I had some grasp of the universe it is set in, and that Duncan's piece suffered through my complete lack of knowledge. Ahmed Khan's 'Elevator Episodes' felt like an undergraduate exercise rather than a publishable fiction. 'Odin's Spear' by Steve Bein could have worked quite reasonably with one more round of editing to put all the (pseudo) science into order, rather than internal conflict.

STORY

1 Ack-Ack Macaque
Gareth Lyn Powell
2 Knowledge
Grace Dugan
3 The Sledge-maker's Daughter
Alastair Reynolds
4 Tearing Down Tuesday
Steven Francis Murphy
5 Molly and the Red Hat
Benjamin Rosenbaum
6 The Lost Xuyan Bride
Aliette de Bodard
7 Deer Flight
Aliette de Bodard
8 Exvisible
Carlos Hernandez
9 Metal Dragon Year
Chris Roberson
10 Toke
Tim Akers
11 Winter
Jamie Barras
12 Heartstrung
Rachel Swirsky
13 Islington Crocodiles
Paul Meloy
14 Dada Jihad
Will McIntosh
15 The Good Detective
M. John Harrison
16 The Best of Your Life
Jason Stoddard
17 The Final Voyage of La Riaza
Jayme Lynn Blaschke
18 The Men in the Attic
John Phillip Olsen
19 Where the Water Meets the Sky
Jay Lake
20 A Handful of Pearls
Beth Bernobich

ART

1 Metal Dragon Year (213 cover)
Kenn Brown
2 Sphaira (209 cover)
Jim Burns
3 Lunar Flare (211 cover)
Richard Marchand
4 Green Man (210 cover)
Douglas Sirois
5 Light in the Dark (212 cover)
Osvaldo Gonzalez
6 A Handful of Pearls
illustration by Jesse Speak
7 Deer Flight
illustration by Stefan Olsen

MUNDANE-SF

This is the Mundane special issue of *Interzone*. What's Mundanity? It's an effort to make SF the best it can be.

Best-possible SF would be *science* fiction. It might play fast and loose with the frontiers of theory, but it wouldn't make regular use of things current science has every reason to believe are impossible. The original Mundane manifesto was an agreement to write a story that gave up things like FTL, or near-FTL without time dilation.

Best-possible SF would be *original*. It wouldn't be a story about climate change and nothing else. It wouldn't rely on tropes that are not only tired, but so unlikely as to be a form of fantasy. If it gives itself some slack on the science, it does so to open up a new possibility. So the Mundanes agreed to try out stories that avoided time travel or parallel universes which are not only unlikely but overly familiar.

The idea was that Mundanity would work like the Dogme school of film-making to create a space for different kinds of SF. It was about what we *didn't* want. Here's what we *do*.

Best-possible SF would be at least as interesting and unexpected as current science fact articles or the Wikipedia entry on its subject.

If a story *says* it's about the future, it should make an effort in good faith to show a future. That won't be our world with one small change. The culture, economy, and technology will all have shifted. In the future, people talk differently, react differently.

It would show that change, real inner change, happens in people's souls, and never stops happening. The subject of SF is *change*.

So stuff really *happens* in SF: both the characters and their circumstance shift.

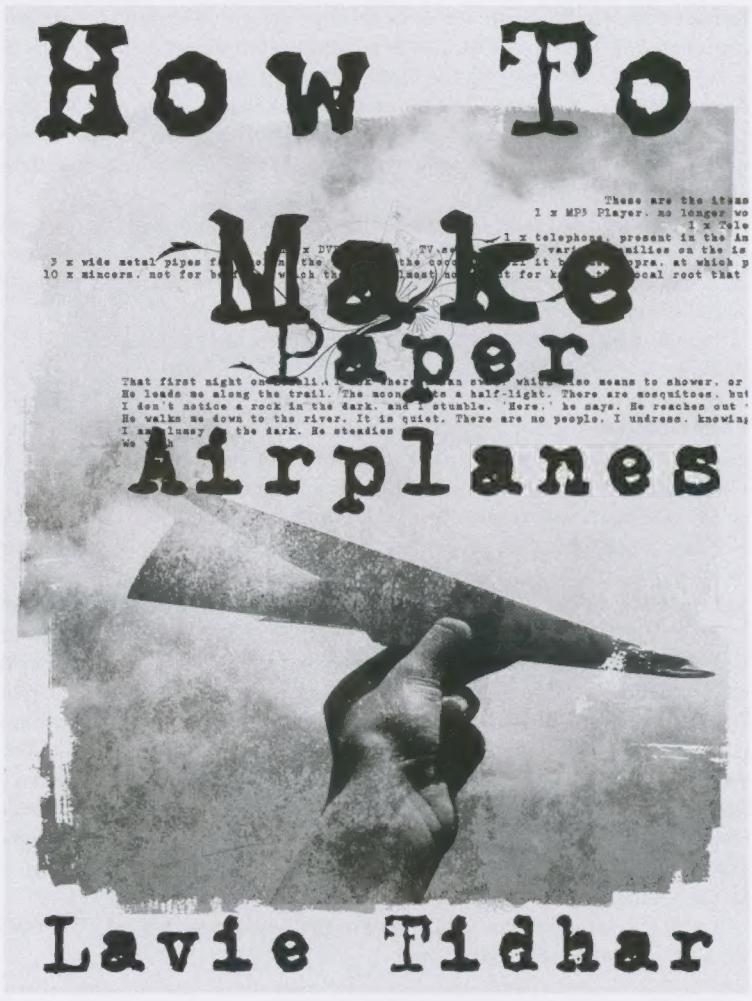
And if you've gone to all the effort of seeing a different future, the struggle of the characters and the story of that society should in some way be related. Which means that there is no story without vivid, conflicted, interesting characters who are in a tight spot.

This issue shows what new dreams emerge when you agree to write outside the old.

You get dreams of sustainable futures in which the best of humanity survives in new forms. You get some lovely old ideas restored: domed cities or utopian dreams. You get new romances of travel: zeppelins and sailing ships. You get a love of empowered communications through technology. You get merging with animals and directed genetic change. You get Mighty Mouse genes making something not unlike superheroes. You get a certain kind of grim satire about current stupidities. You get a new focus on what life is really like. You get less gunfire.

You get a whole bunch of stuff that gives you hope. And that was the lovely surprise of putting together this issue at a time when the future looks so dark. To all the authors who sent us their dreams in prose: keep imagining something new. To readers: enjoy.

— Geoff Ryman



The distance from Sola to the island of Ureparapara is approximately three hours by boat with an outboard motor, assuming the sea is calm. When waves rise as high as houses and the rain lashes your body and face like a storybook pirate's whip it can take a little longer.

The name for the old sailor's whip is a Cat o' Nine Tails. There is no equivalent word in Bislama.

A long time ago Ureparapara was a volcano. One day it erupted, and the force of the explosion tore a great chunk in the walls of the crater and let the sea through. Water flooded in, killing the fire, forming a beautiful and isolated harbour named – by Captain Bligh as he was cast adrift from the *Bounty* – Divers Bay.

In the local language the name of the place is Lehalorop. But we're the ones who make the maps.

These are the items of advanced technology currently present on Ureparapara: 1 x MP3 Player, no longer working, held by Mr William William of the village store in Lehali; 1 x Tele-radio, present in the small clinic in Lehali; 1 x telephone, present in the Anglican church in Divers Bay, the other side of the island from Lehali; 5–10 x DVD Players + TV sets, held by various families on the island, powered occasionally by use of a private generator for the benefit of watching Hollywood movies; 3 x wide metal pipes for smoking the white of the coconut until it becomes copra, at which point it is packed into bags and left until the ship arrives (every six months) and exchanged for candles,

matches and tinned fish; 10 x mincers, not for beef, of which there is almost none, but for kava, the local root that – when cut, ground, and mixed with water – produces a dank, brown, smelly liquid that leaves the mouth numb and induces relaxation.

Q: If one village has a tele-radio, and the other has a phone, how do they communicate?
A: They don't.

Sola lies on the eastern side of the island of Vanua Lava, a small, sleepy town that serves as the administrative centre for the Banks and Torres islands, a remote and inaccessible province of the Republic of Vanuatu. There used to be electricity, but the Assistant Mechanic blew up the town's generator some time ago and now there isn't. There is a Market House, serving indifferent food, the money earned used for the fund to send the church choir to the Solomon Islands next spring; there is a bank which doubles up as the post office; there is a clinic without a doctor; there is an airport where the small Air Vanuatu plane lands three times a week. There are plenty of kava bars.

We sit in Cool Breeze and the only light is the glowing tips of our Peter Jackson cigarettes and a candle in a glass jar. "It's a question of technology," Jimmy Morgan says. He is talking about Ureparapara. "Lehali and Divers Bay can't communicate with each other. Each village wants the piece of technology the other village has."

We greet this with silence. The sun had already set, and there is no moon. The Milky Way is hidden behind clouds. It's a long way back to the base in the dark, and it looks like it's going to rain.

"I think I have malaria," Sam Friedman says, and we greet that, too, in silence. Ben Tucker gets up and pays for another round of shells. "Research," he says, unnecessarily.

Q: What is the most important technology brought by the *Waetman* to Vanuatu?
Father Barnabas, Anglican Church, Lehali (68): The word of Our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Abortions are illegal.

When I first arrived in Vanuatu I asked my instructor, a pale blond man from England, what the word for homosexual was. He answered with surprising savagery that he didn't know but that it was probably something like *wan man I mekem fakfak widem narafala man.*

The words for a homosexual in Bislama are: *man blong man, fifti-fifti, hafhaf, pede, pufta.* (Crowley's *A New Bislama Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 2003)

Homosexuality is illegal.

There are four of us in the small base in Sola. Jimmy Morgan, who works on renewable energy and currently focuses on copra oil generators; Sam Friedman, a geneticist working on producing a tree with self-fermenting coconuts; and Ben Tucker, working on what he calls Kava Pop and the rest of us call Sickly Cola: how to make kava taste good while retaining its effect, so that it could be bottled and sold commercially to the export market. I'm not a scientist, I just run the shop.

"We're losers," Jimmy Morgan says, not without satisfaction, "but at least here we're out of harm's way. I mean, imagine if they put us on some weapons R&D. I mean, at least Sam is only trying to make coconut cocktails come out of a coconut – which is a laudable goal, Sam, laudable – if they let him design a weapon we'd have exploding coconuts being dropped out of planes and then where would we be?"

The base is funded jointly by the European Union and AusAid and, like most of their projects, it's something of a joke. The base's official name is The Vanuatu South Pacific Research and Development Station, and the money comes from the Scientific Development Initiative Fund for South Pacific Countries, the SDIF-SPC. The base is situated in a small area on the point-end of Sola, close to Karepuak – the small island of Pakea is *just* out of sight behind the hill – comprising three semi-permanent buildings which are a mix of concrete flooring and bamboo walls, two brick buildings, and an open shed we sometimes use to get drunk in, when we can get drinks shipped over from Santo. The locals call the base the Coconut Plantation. So far, Jimmy's copra generators might work if anyone locally bothered to produce copra, which they don't. Before, the whole place was a plantation run by the French. Now when a coconut falls it remains down, unless someone passing by had a sudden desire to eat it. Sam's self-fermenting coconuts seem to be an unrealised dream, though he has the best funding. Most of his budget goes on somewhat exotic drinks, and we stack up the bottles afterwards in a pyramid behind Ben's lab, which doubles up as an unofficial *nakamal*, or kava-bar.

"How are you doing with that local girl?" Jimmy asks Sam Friedman. "What's her name again? Joy Anne? Joy Lynne?"

"Fuck off," Sam says. The smoke curls around the bald dome of his head. The truth is that the girl he likes, who lives on the neighbouring island, Mota Lava, has her eyes on the son of the village chief, and no eyes at all as far as balding geneticists are concerned. "And you?" Jimmy says, turning to me with a smirk, "How is *your* love life these days?"

The distance from Sola to the island of Ureparapara is approximately three hours by boat with an outboard motor, assuming the sea is calm. The trip costs twenty-four thousand vatu. There is no airstrip and there are no boats. There are three cruise ships a year, which come mainly for the reef islands nearby but stop over for a few hours in Divers Bay, when the locals arrange a *kastom* dance, then sell carvings to the tourists. There are two cargo ships a year, owned by a Chinese man in Santo. The ships arrive and buy copra. The islanders then pay that money back for goods – kerosene and cooking oil and rice – at a premium. Then the ship leaves.

When I arrive in Lehali for the first time it is low tide, and the boat stops beside the reef and I climb out and step onto the stones. Small living things, half flower, half tentacles, wave under my foot. Ahead the mountains rise sharply, the former volcano walls a sheer, exhausting climb, and I wonder, as I always do afterwards, what they hide behind them.

It's there, at Lehali, with the sea a fine grey mirror and the kids waving from the village on high, that I first see him.

"Ol tomato blong yu oli olsem wanem?" Clifton asks. Cool Breeze is his nakamal. "The tomatoes are good," I say. Vanua Lava is an island of rain, rain, rain. Everything grows. "Tomatoes," Jimmy Morgan says, and he burps. "What's the bloody point?"

We line up for another shell of kava. It's getting late, even by island standards, but the kava in the bucket isn't finished yet and no one wants to go home. We drink *wan wan*, and then there is a chorus of spitting and Ben Tucker says, as he always does, "This stuff tastes like shit."

"So make it taste better," Sam says, as he always does, and Ben grins around a new cigarette and says, "I might just do that."

I planted tomatoes all around the base. Then cucumbers. Then onions, then carrots, then parsley and basil and sage. The truth is that we mostly eat what they cook at the Market House, and that's fish in weak coconut sauce, rice and yams, and a weak white coffee with Sunshine powder for milk. Sometimes, if we're lucky, someone kills a pig.

"You ever taste cat?" Clifton asks. Jimmy burps again. "You have to skin it first, then wash it in *solwota*. Then you boil it until the meat is done, and then you milk coconut *antap* and cook it a bit longer. Best thing you'll ever taste."

Jimmy grins and points at me and says, "He doesn't eat pussy."

That first night on Lehali, I ask where I can swim, which also means to shower, or to wash, in Bislama. He is with me then, the son of the pastor, born in the Solomons, grown in the Banks, his naked torso dark cocoa in the half-full moon; a fisherman's body, taut like a fishing line. Two paths fork out into the bush. His name is Michelangelo. He points. "This one is for the women. This one is for the men."

He leads me along the trail. The moon casts a half-light. There are mosquitoes, but for once I don't notice them.

I don't notice a rock in the dark, and I stumble. "Here," he says. He reaches out to me. "Hold my hand."

He walks me down to the river. It is quiet. There are no people. I undress, knowing he is watching me, then step into the water. It is cool, good against my skin.

I am clumsy in the dark. He steadies me.

We wash.

"I'm writing a science fiction story about us," Sam Friedman says. "It has no aliens in it, no commercial space travel, no telepathy."

"*You're* a fucking alien," Jimmy Morgan says.

"I can tell you how the story ends," Sam says, ignoring him.

I say, "How?"

"One night," Sam says, and the candle makes his eyes twinkle, "one night we get drunk and mix up all the experiments together. Ben uses my self-fermenting coconuts for his kava-pop experiment. Jimmy hooks up a generator to power things up – "

"It's not that simple – " Jimmy starts.

"And then," Sam says, again ignoring him, "the whole thing explodes. It's a huge fireball. It makes a crater the size of Sola. But we all survive anyway, I'm not quite sure how yet."

"Hiding under our beds?" Ben Tucker says, and Sam smiles and says, "Maybe. Anyway, it turns out that all this time, while everyone thought we were wasting time and EU money, we were sitting on a revolutionary new fuel, made with kava and coconuts, and you can power rockets with it. Vanuatu launches a space programme, and the story ends with the first Ni-Vanuatu astronaut looking at the Earth from space and trying to find his home island, which is naturally this one."

"Wan Ni Vanuatu man we hemi go long spes?" Clifton says. He has been listening. "Wanem nem blong stori olsem hemia?"

"Science fiction," Sam says. "It's a Western form of popular literature that – "

Clifton shakes his head slowly. "Kava is finished," he says, and blows out the candle.

But I believed in telepathy. When I next arrive in Ureparapara he is there, on the shore, watching me as I stumble over the rocks to the land. His smile has a missing tooth, but it is whole all the same. Later, we sit on a low wooden bench in the shade and eat grapefruit, and watch the sea below. It is a ritual we follow, afterwards. And we sit like this, olsem hemia, semak, when he tells me he is sick.

"Wan boy Solomon," he says, and he shrugs, perhaps as if he is apologising, perhaps as if it has little significance. "Mi mitim hem long Santo."

He did not tell me he had gone to Santo. I put down the fruit. My stomach feels hollow and warm, as if it has tides and solwota inside. I say, "Wanem sik?"

"Mi no save," he says. And then, into my waiting silence, reluctantly, "Oli telem se hemi wan samting blong immune system blong me." He has large, perfect eyes when he looks at me. "Hemi wan virus nomo."

Yia 11 assignment, Arep Secondary School, Sola: Write a story about a sick person close to you. How does he feel? How do you feel? Is the sickness socially acceptable where you live? Here in Vanuatu, diseases come and go in waves, travelling across the South Pacific, visiting first one island, then another. Write a story about one such disease. Does it have a cure? How would you feel if the person you loved died, or was about to die?

We walk slowly back to the base. There's a single torch between us, and we step carefully over the stones. Jimmy weaves a drunken path. The snake dance, he calls it. The rest of us are not that much steadier. "A torch," Ben Tucker says, "now that's technology you can rely on."

"When you write science fiction," I say, and stop, leaving it like a question. Sam says, "Yes?"

"You can make up anything you want, can't you? Fly to the stars, meet aliens, invent a cure for every disease?"

"I flew to the stars once," Jimmy says. "You ever try that bell flower they have here? I think it's called Angel Trump. Man, that stuff will make you talk to aliens."

"I don't think it's that simple," Sam says. For a moment he stops, and I do too. The others walk past us. Sam touches my arm. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say. Then, "Thanks."

"When are you going back to Parapara?" Sam asks. "I don't know," I say. I think, *Soon*. Then I say it.

He says, "Good," and we begin walking again. The road is empty and quiet. When we get to the base I check on the tomatoes and then go to sleep.

The next day we are all hungover and we just sit under the mango tree and watch the world go by. Ben Tucker disappears inside his lab and returns with a stack of blank white papers. He hands them out as the children watch. I fold mine, once, twice, bend, bend again, fold. An airplane.

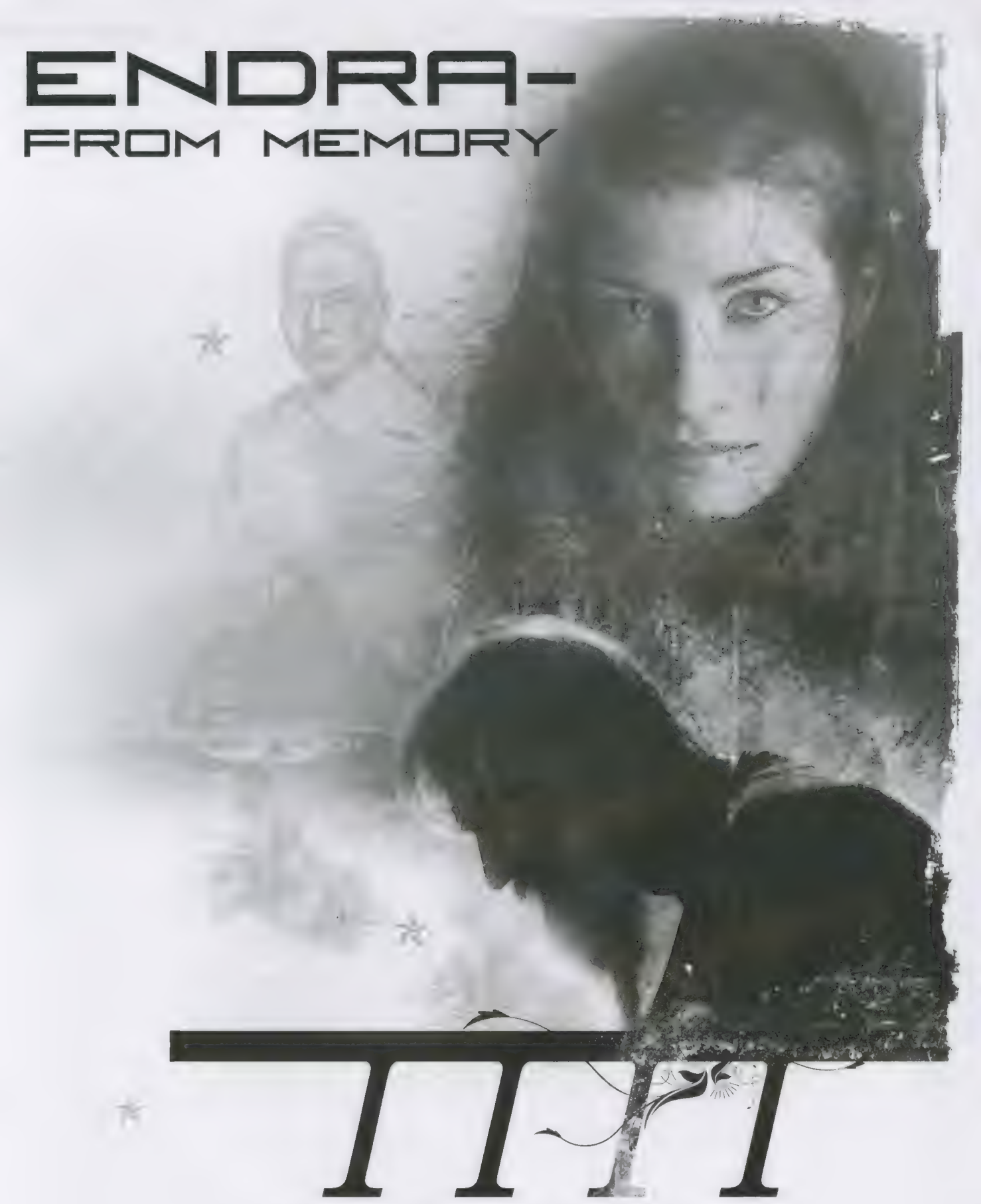
"At least we're doing *something* useful," Jimmy says, and he hands his plane to a young boy.

"Aerodynamics, aircraft construction and maintenance…" Sam says, finishing his plane and handing it to a small girl. I finish mine, hand it over, start another one.

Soon there is a fleet of paper aircraft flying everywhere, filling up the skies. ✪

Lavie Tidhar i bin stap long Vanuatu long Vanua Lava Aelan long 2007. Long Taem ia, hemi raetem sam stori blong laef blong ples ia, olsem stori ia, nem blong hem "Hao nao blong mekem ol pepa eroplen." Lavie i talem *Interzone* tankyu tumas blong putum stori ia long magazin blong yu. Hemi gat hop se bae yufala i laekem stori ia! Ahu!

ENDRA-
FROM MEMORY



TIT

CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO

From the memoirs of Melizan kem Gishcar-Shwy

It was a bright chilly day when the ship came into the harbor, turned gracefully as her sails were lowered while she slid into the end of the dock, her flotation out-riggers nudging up to the tarred wood; the gangplank was lowered and its crew of six disembarked at the base of the ramp of the dock's loading crane. The grand ship flew the colors of the Taksteppe Empire, and everyone was excited to see the ship so far to the north and the east of her home port. Men and women from nine other ships crowded around the dock where this splendid vessel was secured, for the ships of the Taksteppe Empire were among the most admired on Earth, and were not often found in this quarter of the globe.

No one who saw it will ever forget the impression Endra YuiduJin made as she stepped from her deck onto the gangplank; I haven't forgotten, although it was more than fifty years since she first arrived here; no other arrivals have eclipsed the splendor of her first introduction to Lavrant City. She came to the top of the gangplank and stood, the wind snapping at her while she smiled; unlike her crewmen, her clothes were made of Taksteppe silks, and they glowed as if lit from within. Like many foreign Captains, she had a lightning gun and a small image recorder in her hands. I came to the foot of the gangplank, since it was my duty to monitor all new arrivals; she slipped the gun into her wide belt of gilded leather scales and faced me. "What ship?" I asked in Coigne, the language used by nautical people the world over.

"The *Empress FahrenDier*. Out of Sui-Kan-below-the-Dam. Captain Endra YuiduJin asks for the haven of your harbor and access to your markets. If you'll tell me what I owe for the privilege of tying up here, I would be most appreciative." She made a sweeping kind of bow and came down to the dock, apparently unaware of the sensation she had created.

I found it impossible to speak, so captivated was I – I'm afraid I goggled at her.

Her eyes glistened with amusement. "Will you give me permission to land? Or tell me what I must do to acquire permission?"

"I will," I said, and would have said the same thing if she had asked permission to take off and fly. "First you must come to me."

"You're the harbormaster," she said, regarding me with mild but approving curiosity. "Or a newsmonger?"

"Harbormaster isn't quite the function, but I have the authority to admit you to the trading zone of Lavrant City. I am the Trading Monitor." I smiled at her, not wanting to cause her any alarm. "How is it that you are so far from the usual trade routes of the Taksteppe Empire? We see few of your ships."

She looked at me and laughed. "Happenstance, and perhaps luck."

I put her age at thirty, though she seemed older; I knew that the sea pulled the youth from the faces of those who earned their living on the water, and made allowances for that as I studied her. Yet thirty, or even thirty-five seemed young for a Captain. "Is this your first command, or are you on a mission?"

"It is not, and yes, I am," she said emphatically. "I am trying to circle the world west to east and north to south. My mother tried it, twenty years ago, and failed at the south pole as the weather turned hard. I've been at sea for almost two years. There were eight in my crew when we started out. One stayed in Bhandi, another was injured and died." She pointed to the four windmills attached to the outrigger rails amidship that ran the generators which powered the lights and machines of the ship, and when the wind failed, kept the vessel moving. "We need to replace the windmill on the foredeck. It was damaged in a storm, nine days ago. The rest need inspecting and retuning. We have a long way to go; we're a long way from home."

"Eight crew," I mused, regarding the grand ship that was being secured by lines to the high metal cleats on the edge of the dock. "A small crew for such a long voyage, and such a large vessel."

"But a loyal one, and very experienced," she said, and held out her hand for the thin sheet of stiffened cotton that I would use to record her arrival, her cargo bought and sold, and her departure. "What do I owe you and where do I put my sign?"

"You owe the city six ounces of gold or twenty-one standard blocks of first grade plastic for seven days dockage. You sign here. And here," I said to her as if no one were near us. "Do you have an invoice on your cargo?"

"In total or for trade or sale?" She regarded me steadily, and then she laughed. "I haven't made up my mind about what I want from here. When I've decided I'll let you know what cargo I'm offering. In the meantime, I'll order the plastic blocks delivered to – "

" – to my office. It's at the end of the main dock, where the freight-yard begins. The office has three gold stars over the door."

"Then it's settled," said Endra, about to depart. "You'll have your plastic by sunset, top quality, don't worry. Any newsmonger who wants to find me can seek me out where I lodge." She made a show of pondering, and though I knew it was a ploy, I was still captivated by her. "Perhaps I should mention that I have a guard belowdecks, and only I can disarm it."

I cleared my throat. "That may be a problem. Here in Lavrant City we ask to know what all the cargo is, whether or not you offer it in the market."

She had already taken a step away from me, but she stopped and regarded me as if I had deliberately offended her. "Why is that?"

I could see many in the crowd around us watching with anticipation, as if they wondered how she would react. "Not long ago there were pirates in these northern waters, and they would steal from our merchants and merchants in other cities, and the goods would be sold far away. Since that time, we have required a complete inventory of cargo upon arrival, and a comparison inspection before you depart, and records kept so that the stolen goods may be traced." I had explained this many times before, but this was the first time I had felt apologetic about it. "Our coasting courier-ships carry information to all the main ports within three days' sail."

"I see," she said, her brows rising. "Well, you give me something to think about."

I could not allow her to walk away yet. "If it will ease your mind, I'll attend to the inspection myself. You may have your guard monitor all I do. But it must be done, or dockage will have to be rescinded."

She made a show of considering my offer. "All right. I'll have my recorder prepare a copy of the current inventory, and you may check it out tomorrow. I'll give it to you in the morning, and arrange for your inspection then, if you don't mind."

It was highly irregular, so I said, "The custom is for the inspection to occur within an hour of arrival, but as you are unfamiliar with our laws, we will station a guard at the base of your gangplank from now until morning, one that cannot be disarmed without sounding a loud warning. You may join us for the inspection, if you like." I motioned to Skeimir, my assistant, and said, "See that this is done."

"If it is your custom, then do what you must." As she moved away from me, she looked back at me in a manner that I thought might be flirtatious – although I had long since learned that the customs of others are often misunderstood. "Not to impose, but can you tell me where I can get a drink and a bed for the night? Something stronger than wine, and among sailors and others used to the sea? I don't like to drink alone in a strange port."

I thought for a moment. "The Blue Pelican has been a favorite of

sea-goers for three generations. It's one street over, and along on your right. You can see the sign easily from the corner." Glowmosses were sealed in the sign, the image of the bird shining by their light as they consumed the thin smudge of bacteria that outlined the pelican; the smudge was renewed daily. I pointed it out to her. "With the sky-blue door."

"Thanks. You can find me there, then. I need a bath, a meal, a drink, and a bed. I trust they'll provide them?"

"Certainly," I said. "At a reasonable price."

The assembled people on the dock parted to let her through. She was almost to the edge of them when she halted and called back to me, still in Coigne, "What language do you speak here?"

"Candish, and some Nirikal," I replied.

"I'd best stick to Coigne, then. I don't know the other two at all." She waved and went on toward the Blue Pelican.

I watched her go, my thoughts disordered and excited. Never before had I been so captivated, and never had I encountered such a remarkable woman. I should not permit myself to be so engaged by a visitor to Lavrant City, but I couldn't help it: I was fascinated, and I knew I would have to find an excuse to seek her out by the end of the day. The afternoon would be an endless wait for an opportunity to visit the Blue Pelican.

From the desk journal of Ogmar kem Zrol, keeper of the Blue Pelican

Guest 14 today, arrived early afternoon – Endra YuiduJin, Captain of Taksteppe Empire merchant ship the *Empress FahrenDier*, home port Sui-Kan-below-the-Dam. Assigned Room 41, paid for a week in gold. Ordered an hour in the bath, and said she may want more later in the week, for she contemplated a stay of four or five days. I dispatched Ringrif to bring her things from her ship; strict instructions for him to stay abovedecks, since the ship's guard is set below. She bespoke six rooms for her crew and paid for their lodging, then she ordered a meal for herself to be served in two hours, and took my recommendation for the pork-and-lentils, claiming she was tired of fish; then she asked if Temui HeimunWei had been in this city of late, and I said I did not know this Temui HeimunWei. She offered me a standard block of plastic to improve my memory, and I told her once more that I didn't know the person in question, much as I would have liked the plastic.

From the report of Volai kir Achdoer, ledgermaker of Lavrant City

The *Empress FahrenDier* has two long flotation out-riggers which contain no cargo or other supplies. Like all Taksteppe Empire vessels, the ship has a flexible frame and is made to withstand severe storms without breaking apart; the sails are battened at regular intervals and fold up like blinds; from their arrangement, the ship is best designed to reach and run, although its outriggers would allow it to point into the wind fairly closely. There are some signs of recent repair on the starboard prow, which appear to be in good order. The galley is amidships, the Captain's cabin aft, the crew's quarters forward. Generators are at the mid-fore and mid-aft decks, in ceramo-plastic housings. There are six cargo holds, four of which are full. Most of the cargo is fairly standard: plastic cubes for currency, long cheese, textiles, copper and gold wire from Ormud, wine and distilled wine from Karpat, some objects said to be from sunken cities like Venz and Myam and Riod, to choose the deepest. Two waterproof chests contain bulletins and broadsheets from many ports, and may be copied, I am told, for a fee. There are stores of foodstuffs in a preservation unit, which serves the Captain and crew, and stored clothing for weather of all sorts, and some foods that can be sold as well as eaten. But the most astounding thing in the cargo holds is wood – three different varieties, all in standardized lengths and widths, cut with precision and ready for use. This ship carries a fortune in lumber, and all of it marked with seals to show its legality. There must be more than enough to build a large house, entirely of wood. Where are they willing to cut down so many trees and then sell them? I know of no city or nation that is profligate with its trees.

The recorder shows the route the ship has followed, and where trade has taken place, with whom and what profit has accrued from such negotiation. The personal log of the Captain confirms what is recorded. It is truly a great journey the Captain has undertaken. I can only guess at which port they traded for all the wood – and what they must have paid for it. I have added copies of the inventory and of the itinerary and made an entry in the recorder that I have done this on my own authority.

From the memoirs of Melizan kem Gishcar-Shwy

I spent half that evening at the Blue Pelican, listening to Endra YuiduJin tell stories of her voyages and all she had seen in her travels, which, if even half of it was true, was enough to compel all her listeners to regard her with the same respect that an officer of the Fleet is held. Mard Compatel, the main newsmonger, sat at the end of her table and scribbled while Endra spoke. She told of departing from the Taksteppe Empire and proceeding eastward past the Nimo Archipelago to the Three Chains Islands and the port of Yash-Cu, then north to the Great Sandras Sea, which she entered and where she traded at three ports before returning to the ocean and headed northward where she docked at Scade Mountain before going northward again; she said she encountered many large icebergs but little pack-ice, over the crest of the world and down to Lavrant City. I told her pack-ice was quite rare in this part of the ocean, even though it is to the north a goodly way. Endra was curious about the lack of pack-ice, but she wouldn't say why, and when I pressed her on the matter, she changed the subject: she spoke of many storms in the warm parts of the ocean, and humid air at the midpoint of the world that was more water than not; she said she had called at fourteen ports and had encountered a total of fifty-three ships at sea since the voyage began; one of those sighted, she said, was flying a plague flag, and so steered away from it. Her intention, she said, was to go down the coast all the way to the Bulge, then cross to the eastern side of the ocean and continue to the south end of the world, then pass through the Southern Atolls, and finally to return to the Taksteppe Empire at last. She said her recorder had corrected the charts for the area northwest of here, where one of the passages had been changed by a massive landslide. "Keeping charts current is a constant labor. I will leave a copy of the revisions we have for you."

"Thank you." My appreciation was genuine, for charts often went out of date quickly.

"It is my duty as a Captain to provide current information to other seafarers." She said it by rote, but with a shine in her eyes that made me hesitate to ask her anything more on the matter.

At one point in the conversation, I said, "You are planning to trade everywhere you go, I suppose."

"I have to do something to make the voyage worthwhile. Trading is the purpose of the journey, officially." She smiled again, more beguilingly than before. "It isn't just my advantage I'm serving: you can profit from a larger trading zone. If I bring a good report, there will be more traders coming from the Taksteppe Empire to Lavrant City, and other ports."

"Very likely," I allowed. "And no doubt we will have cause to thank you in time for your travels."

She laughed once. "Why do you dislike the ocean so much?"

"It is a devourer of land and of lives," I said before I had actually considered my answer. "It encroaches constantly."

Endra laughed again. "And what does not? At least the sea brings freedom; it gives us its bounty. You curse the rising water, but you forget that when the floods were at their worst, how would any of us have lived without the fish of the ocean to feed us." She took her cup and drained it, then held it up for more. "It is good to be ashore and in pleasant company."

Casting a wary eye upon her and convinced he had gained all the information he could use, the newsmonger rose and bowed himself out of the taproom.

"It continues to rise – the sea does," I said. "More slowly, but it rises. In the last hundred years, it has risen by more than the length of my leg, and there is no sign of abatement."

"And one day it will fall, according to all the scholars of Pideng. The sunken cities around the world were once above the water, all of them. The great teachers say they will be so again, in time." She tossed a coin to the barman as he refilled her cup. "And if the water rises until there is no land left, then it will be as well to be on good terms with the ocean, wouldn't it?" She drank, a little of the distilled wine sliding down her cheek.

"It would have to rise a very long way," I said.

"And people would have to crowd onto fewer and fewer islands," she said, a morose note in her voice. "That, or drown as so many have, they say. The analysts on Ropea say that in all the world there are less than half a billion people now, and the numbers continue to fall. In Tit'clan, they say that there are less than a quarter million residents, where legend says there were once ten times that number." She leaned back, looking up at the ceiling while balancing on the rear legs of her chair. "The marshes of N'Da – you know where they are, in the south-southeast? Once they were vast plains and creatures we have only seen in ancient pictures roamed there in their thousands upon thousands. As the water rises, many things are lost, not just drowned cities."

"So all the records agree," I said somberly, wishing the unhappiness in her face would vanish, and not knowing how to make that happen.

She continued to drink, finally looking at me over the rim of her cup before she hoisted it for another refill. "Now that we're alone, shall I tell you a secret?"

I considered her bibulous state and knew it was an imposition to ask her anything more. "If you like," I said, making a sop to my conscience that I had not actually encouraged her to tell me anything. I wondered if I should simply postpone our discussion, but I couldn't make myself leave her.

"I have a bet. With Temui HeimunWei." She giggled and drank some more from her newly full cup. "We're looking for Simoon. Whoever finds it first gets the other's ship. I'm looking forward to being Captain of the *Wave Flyer*." Her eyes shone with excitement at the thought. "Last year, when he and I met in Bongar, he said he had come upon a map to the Six Inland Seas. They're south of you, according to the map, and to the west, and Simoon is at the far end of the central sea." She wagged a finger at me. "Now don't tell anyone. Don't say a word. Not to anyone. But if you see Temui HeimunWei, then tell him – only him, mind – that I'm going to try to find the entrance to the Six Inland Seas."

How I managed to maintain a calm face, I can't begin to remember. But I couldn't keep from saying, "Isn't Simoon just a legend?"

"Most people think so," she said, "which is why no one's ever found it."

"What do you mean?"

She gave me all her owlish attention. "If everyone thinks it doesn't exist, no one will ever find it, because they won't bother looking for it. But the legends say it is located at the far end of the third of the Six Inland Seas. Once the passage to the Six Inland Seas is found, then it shouldn't be difficult to go and look for Simoon."

"Aren't you asking for a lot of disappointment?" I asked, trying to be gentle with her, and arousing her ire.

"How could I be disappointed?" She slapped her palm on the table. "It's Simoon!" She looked around the taproom and lowered her voice. "Oh, I don't expect to find all the treasures lost to the rising water, and all the delights of the ancient times, but I believe that Simoon has managed to keep more of those treasures than the rest of us have, and maintained a way of life that is more pleasant than most of the cities of the world can boast. They say that the people of Simoon love knowledge more than all other pursuits, and uphold justice. They have banished hunger and strife. If nothing else, they would have a great many things to teach us."

I tried not to be too skeptical – she had been at sea for many months and she was giddy from drink – but I had to say, "Do you truly think they would want to be found, if they exist at all? If they have achieved so fine a society, why would they disrupt it with strangers?"

"Well, wouldn't you?" she challenged him. "Don't you think they'd want to know they aren't the only ones left?" She let this question hang in the air before she said, "I know I would."

"If they have a peaceful, just society, as it's said they do, where sadness is unknown, they might not want anything to change it, and admitting those from beyond Simoon would bring changes," I said, not because I believed this, but because she was so caught up in her pursuit of the place.

"How cynical you are," she said as she pushed herself to her feet, then leaned over and kissed me full on the mouth before teetering off toward Room 41.

As I watched her go, I tried to think of all the things I should have said, and all the things I might have done, but I knew they were useless, and I wondered how I could bear to see her every day she would remain here.

From the records of the Lavrant City Trading Authority

The trading of the *Empress FahrenDier* has concluded with the following exchanges with registered merchants of the Lavrant City Trading Authority: to the merchants of the city, ten planks of oak, for fifty-nine standard blocks of first grade plastic and fourteen barrels of purified water; to the merchants of the city, ten bolts of silk, for ten full bundles of musk-ox yarn and a crate of cured otter-skins; to the merchants of the city, two full spools of copper wire, for a newly restored generator and windmill for the *Empress FahrenDier*; to the merchants of Eijmor, nine full bolts of Theopic linen, for sixteen casks of Gasbin resin, and two casks of dried figs.

From the memoirs of Melizan kem Gishcar-Shwy

I hated to see her leave, but I was also relieved. The *Empress FahrenDier* stood out to sea with half her sails unfurled and batoned, as fine a vessel as any I have ever seen. I wished Endra YuiduJin well on her fruitless search, and I hoped that she would come to her senses and return to Lavrant City, and to me, even as I knew that she was a madness in my blood. I chided myself for such a selfish idea – for how could she give up the sea because I adored her? – but I could not banish it entirely from my thoughts; it nagged me unceasingly for two years, until at last she came back.

That was a windy day, the bay afroth with spume, the sea twisting and coiling like a serpent; the sky lowered under heavy clouds and the wharf was seething with crews looking for safe mooring for their ships, since a storm was coming. The *Empress FahrenDier* glided up to the dock as if the deteriorating weather meant nothing, snuggling up to the berth as if she had been a rowboat on calm waters; as I hurried toward the ship, I saw Endra YuiduJin standing at the steering console, a roguish grin on her face. She turned to look at me, and waved. All the perils of the gathering tempest faded from my mind as I waited for her gangplank to descend.

"Did you miss me?" she asked as she came down to the dock. She looked more tired than she had two years ago, but there was the same glint in her eyes that revealed so much of her nature that I found myself once again almost holding my breath.

"Did you find Simoon?" I countered, and wished as soon as I said it that I had bit my tongue out instead.

"Not yet," she said with the same determination she had expressed before, her unhumorous decision to find this mythic place stronger in her than it had been before. "But I've found more good information to help me in my search. It's out there – I can smell it." She squinted out at the bay as if expecting to find information there on the spume-frosted water.

"What does Temui HeimunWei think?" I asked, trying not to flounder.

"Our paths haven't crossed since I left here last time. I was told that he wintered in Dyskin, far to the south this last year, where it was summer, but I haven't learned where he was bound. I've asked about him in every port, and so far, nothing." She held out her plastic-imbued cloth. "Here is the information you want; your inspector may go aboard to make his report as soon as you like." She lifted her chin, as if expecting me to argue with her. "I'm going along to the Blue Pelican."

I knew I should remain with her ship to supervise the monitoring of the inventory, but once again I called my assistant, Skeimir, and ordered him to take over the monitoring. "I have something I need to ask Captain YuiduJin."

"I'll send to the Blue Pelican if there are any questions." Skeimir tromped toward the gangplank as if he felt he had to carry the sum of the inventory on and off the ship in his own arms.

Endra was already well into her first tankard of strong brandy when I went into the taproom and found her seated on the bench by the fire. She was grinning as she drank. "Kem Gishcar-Shwy," she called out, waving her hand and motioning me to sit across from her. "You'll have hot brandy, too. Two comrades, sharing a drink." She very nearly winked at me, but strove for a little more decorum.

The barmaid regarded me dubiously, but poured out the drink as she had been ordered.

"Have you had a profitable voyage, Endra?" I asked as I sat down across from her; the light from the window was on her face, and I drank in the sight of her.

"Enough, enough," she said. "I was afraid we'd lose all to raiders, but we outran them, and that meant we saved our cargo and our lives. They had impressive guns, but their seamanship failed them in a following sea." She set her tankard down with a satisfying bang, then called out, "What do you have cooking?"

"Shrimp-stuffed salmon and roasted goose; duck eggs and salt-cheese," said the barmaid. "We're supposed to get some upland goat tomorrow."

"I'm hungry tonight," said Endra, and winked at me. "For a lot of things."

I tried to keep myself from feeling encouraged by her innuendo, but I could feel my pulse increase and a tightness in my loins that was not answerable to reason. "I hope all your wants are satisfied."

"So do I," she said, and licked her lips.

"What about the newsmonger? He'll be here shortly."

"I've left word that I'll see him tomorrow afternoon. Tonight I want only your company."

Had it been anyone but her, I would have thought her blatant display unwelcome, but it was Endra, and I had dreamed about her too long to disapprove anything she did. I drank with her and ate with her, and slept next to her while she tossed and mumbled through the night, and in the morning I went to the dock with her, for the joy of her company. Along the way I did what I could to persuade her that she belonged ashore, with me, safe and protected. I knew as I spoke that I was losing her, that all my closely reasoned arguments were nonsense, but I could not keep from saying that "The sea is a demanding life, one that belongs to younger men and women. You have succeeded where your mother failed, and have twice circumnavigated the planet, and your reputation is assured. From the Taksteppe Empire to Riton to the ends of the Earth, you are known as the finest of all the Captains. Can't you be content with that?" It was too much; I knew it as soon as the words passed my lips. I can still recall the look she gave me, reproachful and recalcitrant at once. "I know you love the oceans, and you needn't give them up, but think of all you could do coasting. We need more regular inspections of the coasts, captains for our couriers, and with your background, your contribution would be incredibly valuable."

"Make the sea my hobby," she said in a tone so strange that I couldn't sort out her meaning.

"More than a hobby," I said in what I thought was a helpful manner, "but not as laden with risks as what you have done."

She was about to say something when we rounded the end of the wharf and saw her ship tied up along the dock. Endra shaded her eyes and gave a little cry of dismay and hurried toward her ship.

Besq SoVirth, Endra's First Officer, was pacing up and down the gangplank, his manner agitated. "Captain! Finally!"

"What is it?" In spite of her hard-drinking, enthusiastic eating, and nightmare, she appeared fresh and capable as she stepped onto the gangplank.

SoVirth pointed to the orotund hull of a Ritonic merchant-vessel that was tied up farther down the dock, swaying on the boisterous water. "They arrived not two hours ago. The Watchman said that two days out they encountered the *Wave Flyer* bound to the south and the Maithen Channel."

Endra leaned close to SoVirth. "And Temui HeimunWei – he was aboard the *Wave Flyer*."

"According to the Watchman. I can send for him, if you like?"

I wanted to say something, to encourage doubts in Endra's mind, but I could see already that I would lose any attempt to discourage her. "You're paid for four days," I pointed out, an act of futility.

"Keep it," she said, and addressed SoVirth. "Go and round up the others. Tell them we sail within the hour."

"You'll go against the tide," I warned.

"Our windmills make enough power to get us to the open sea, and we should be able to make good time." She made a wave of impatience and almost hurled SoVirth from the gangplank. "Hurry. We need to be off now. And Melizan," she went on, pointing to me. "Expedite our departure."

"But Endra – "

"Do it for me. Please. Simoon, Melizan. Think. The country that is good and just, and where the treasures of the past haven't been lost." She came and took my arm, looking into my face with such an

open display of supplication that all my stalwart intentions faded and I said, "I'll arrange full credit for you. For next time."

This time her smile was genuine. "Yes. For next time." She watched SoVirth jogging toward the street. "That will be the third time – don't the heroes of seafaring always return three times to their home ports?" She offered me a jaunty little bow. "Next time, Melizan. Truly."

I took a deep breath, prepared to pledge my life to her return, but she was already on the deck, checking the windmills and starting them turning. I had stepped away when she called out to me.

"Wait for me, Melizan. I'll come back to Lavrant City, and to you." She waved as she hurried about, making ready for her departure.

I couldn't bear to stay and watch.

From the report of Volai kir Achdoer, ledgermaker of Lavrant City

On order of the Trading Monitor, Melizan kem Gishcar-Shwy, the overage of dockage payment received from Captain Endra YuiduJin of the *Empress FahranDier* is to be held in trust against dockage charges upon her return.

From the memoirs of Melizan kem Gishcar-Shwy

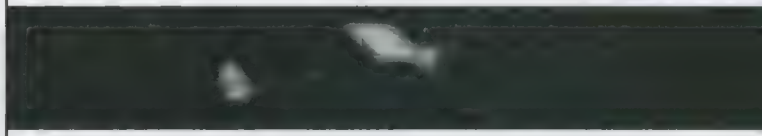
But, of course, she didn't return. For years I railed at myself for not being able to entice her to stay, blaming myself that I had not had the courage to speak to her while I had the chance. Ten years after her last visit, someone said that she and the *Empress FahrenDier* had gone down to the Shallow Sea in the south. Later I heard that she had been seen in the Riton Islands, fighting off the raiders who frequent those waters. Perhaps thirty years ago it was reported that she had become a recluse, living on the isolated peaks of the volcanic island of Jiya, and had given up the sea for a life of contemplation. Two decades ago, after a particularly hard winter, a sailor from Hatp on the Great Sandras Sea said he had seen the wreckage of her ship on the Eastward Isles.

And not so many years ago a traveler said he had heard that she had finally caught up with Temui HeimunWei and together they found Simoon, and were made welcome there.

Gradually Endra YuiduJin passed from speculation to rumor, and then into legend, so that now half the sailors on the boats that call in at the harbor believe she never existed at all, and is only a myth of the oceans, like the Ship of Light. Others, less kindly, say age has distorted my memory, so that what I report is only of dreams and fancies, there never was such a real person as Endra, that I have built this passion on the tales I have heard through the years. But you have seen my proofs, from the inn, from the harbor records, from the Trading Authority, preserved here with my recollections, and you know that she was at Lavrant City in her ship the *Empress FahrenDier*, that flew the colors of the Taksteppe Empire – that Endra is real.

I have passed my seventieth year, well beyond what most people attain, and I don't think I will last another decade; in the long time I have thought about Endra, I have gone from yearning for her return to accepting this would not happen, and mourning her absence. Yet recently I have begun to hope that she did indeed find Temui HeimunWei, and that they reached Simoon, where all the treasures lost to the rising waters remain, pristine and perfect; where all men love knowledge and peace; where there is no hunger, no injustice, no cruelty, and sadness has been forgotten. ✡

A professional writer for forty years, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro has sold eighty-five books and more than ninety works of short fiction, essays and reviews. She also composes serious music. She lives in her hometown – Berkeley, California – with three autocratic cats. In 2003, the World Horror Association presented her with a Grand Master award; the International Horror Guild honored her as a Living Legend in 2006.



The stage seemed far away, but the light-tower was close, almost tangible. Jessica watched it sway above her. The sun appeared to come out from behind a cloud, its light melting the tower's yellow framework into gold-brown stems, waving in the wind. Wheat. Yes! The farmer's – what was his name? – well, anyway, the ripening wheat field from the Woodstock movie.

Before she could appreciate the image's artfulness, a gust of wind separated the wheat, and she caught a glimpse of the crowd. Another gust, the wheat wavered; the crowd grew. In fact, the wheat stalks were painting the crowd. At first they used only the sun colors, yellow, gold, platinum white, but added sapphire, then amethyst and carnelian, until the crowd emerged, half a million strong, wearing blue jeans and work shirts, tie-dye and Indian prints – looking like jewels that had somehow melted in the sun.

She blinked and realized she was watching the Real, not the Virt. Jaykwees had used elaborate holo modeling to make this paltry crowd of a few thousand feel like they were part of the original Woodstock Festival, even though it had taken place 75 years ago and half a world away. If he was using this much imagination on the Real audience, what was he doing on the Virt for the audience that mattered?

She switched on her headset and was immediately overcome with the golden fuchsia tie-dye she heard. What had seemed in Real to be mere hippie feedback guitar was instead a radical experiment with MelodyHue, the new sound-distortion technique. It could convince you in Virt that you were hearing colors. But where other experimenters Jessica had heard were rough, Jaykwees blended sound and light with the visual of the crowd so it all flowed together.

The image changed to a view of the stage, the Who playing. Jaykwees, overlayered with Peter Townshend, painted the world with feedback colors from his Gibson SG. Streaming up from the speakers, flowing above the heads of the crowd, the colors burst into fireworks while the sky darkened and the stars came out. As the light of the last explosion dispersed, a small image developed at what had been its center. It fell to earth as if part of the fireworks and landed in the crowd, now on their feet dancing to The Who.

Jessica ignored the main image and focused on that tiny bit. It was the key to the performance. Jaykwees liked to turn attention away from the key, leaving it to be uncovered on replays. Enhancing it, Jessica saw two people undressing, preparing to make love. Another image from *Woodstock*. But instead of the awkward young people from the movie, these were sensual adults, exuding desire. The man was Jaykwees, of course, and the woman…

Jessica quickly pulled up her royalties. Maybe it was someone else. No, there it was, posted 7.5 seconds ago: a payment for the


MELODY HUE
SEND - VIRTEDITOR AI
LIVE BROADCAST - - -
THE HOUR IS GETTING LATE
BILLIE AUL

use of her image by Jaykwees Leonard. He was using footage from their honeymoon video so it would look like they were making love at Woodstock. The air was suddenly too thick to breathe. This was just as bad as when they were married. How was she supposed to critique his work when he included her in it?

Of course, the fans would love it. Even after Jessica's and Jaykwees' divorce, the audience had responded overwhelmingly to material that included them both. It might even triple the royalties. But money wasn't Jaykwees' motivator. Nor was sheer vindictiveness. He wanted to throw her off balance so he could get something. But what?

She reluctantly returned her attention to the Virt where Jaykwees/Townshend was wrapping up the song, methodically pounding his guitar against the stage floor, calculating the force of each blow both musically and emotionally, as the colors crescendoed into an ear-splitting white. That wasn't *Woodstock* footage, but Jaykwees wouldn't care. He wanted the catharsis, the audience gripped in the primitive rage of his actions, waiting, breathless, for the blow that would smash the guitar to pieces. The holo-title floated in on the bottom right: *To Jessica, With Love. Jaykwees Leonard.*

The crowd, Real and Virt, roared, but all Jessica heard was a line from R. Sakuhin-san's '36 hit song running through her head – *Love = control?*. The Real audience stood cheering, more a release of their own emotional frenzy than a tribute to Jaykwees' art. Or maybe they were applauding his apparent desire to end the break-up of their marriage. She often doubted whether anyone but herself saw past the emotional content of his work to its technical beauty. Maybe she could talk about it in her commentary, though whenever she did that her ratings went down.

Her earphones intoned, "Twenty seconds to live broadcast, nineteen, eighteen…"

She pulled up the 'on location' virtimage of herself, tan in flowing Indian prints amidst the Woodstock crowd in an upstate New York pasture, as if she wasn't covered with sunscreen, wearing a Virt helmet and surrounded by production equipment, sitting in Sapporo's largest park. As she manipulated the controls, she realized that if the fans perceived Jaykwees' performance as an overture aimed at a reconciliation, she was going to have to make some response.

But was Jaykwees serious? Or was it some trick? Was he just trying to get her upset so he could use the emotion for something else he was planning? She didn't have enough information. She needed to be clever, noncommittal and, above all, calm.

The countdown finished. Jessica's hands flew along the production board as she said, "This is Jessica Mason of VirtSat Videocasts coming to you live from Woodstock 2044. Wasn't that something? Another Jaykwees Leonard masterpiece." She replayed the applause. "I think any comment on my part is superfluous. Let's just watch it again."

She started running the file of the performance. On her board she accessed the section with the lovers, deleting the image and filling in the crowd around the delete. She fed the altered section to the broadcast feed. That was subtle enough. The majority of the fans hadn't noticed the couple the first time. The group who did would spot the deletion and place notes on the virtgroups. It would take a while for the fans to get the word and compare the videos. She keyed up a couple of advirts and some prerecorded files to run after the replay.

Her earphones chimed and her Handler program said, "Call from Jaykwees Leonard."

"I'm busy," she told it. She needed time to think before she let him start trying to manipulate her.

"He says it's urgent."

"Then he can type it. If it's short, scroll it." With hardly any delay, *Watch the Flat. J.* scrolled across her vision.

She glanced up at the stage. The roadies would need another ten minutes to clear the stage, twenty minutes to set up the next performer. She could do it, but why did he want her to?

Of course, it never hurt to know what the Fare folk were seeing. Usually they didn't affect royalties that much, since the Fare didn't allow personalized re-viewing. Instead each Fare administrative district had an electronic voting system to determine if they replayed material or simply went on with the regular broadcast. And Virt didn't translate well to Flat, which was what the Fare broadcast. But Woodstock was being heavily viewed in the Northeast USNA, especially on the subsistence farms of the upstate New York district. Maybe he'd done something special for them that she'd missed.

To Jessica, With Love looked stunning even in Flat, but with horror she realized that Jaykwees had dropped the misdirection of the Virt love scene and had just blown it up to full screen for the Flat. Her 'subtle' editing job was anything but in Flat. No doubt the Fare folk would see it as denying them sexual content. She'd alienated a lot of viewers.

She pulled up the few comments that had been posted about her edited Virt version; the situation was even worse. The fans had understood Jaykwees to be sincerely pursuing reconciliation and had seen her deletion as a less-than-satisfactory answer. Why did she always let Jaykwees do things like this to her?

She cut herself off. She wasn't like the rest of her family, blaming their plight on someone else and looking for help to get out of it. She solved her own problems.

She glanced at the stage, and stared at it, stunned. The next performer was already coming out. Dressed in blue jeans and a black shirt, wearing sunglasses and an enormous hat perched on mounds of curly blond hair, he strode across the empty stage. No holo-equipment, no band. The only things on the stage were a microphone and a copy Fender amp. He reached the microphone, saluted the crowd with his Stratocaster copy, plugged it in, and started tuning.

Who the hell was this guy? Jessica called up the schedule. Bobby Zimmerman. Great, a firster. She did a quick search on his name, watching the data feed in her helmet: *Bob Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman on May 24, 1941…*

What was this kid trying to do? No one played Dylan anymore. She'd heard he was good, one of the best of the Rock singer-songwriters, but songs and words were so hopelessly 20th century. The Virt demanded video to overlay – a canvas for current artists to work with. For some reason Dylan had no video. She scanned the bio. Oh, yes, shortly after his death some bizarre dot-com called Dylan-is-God bought all the rights to his video image and blocked any use they considered impious. A decade of that nonsense and not enough people remembered Dylan to make it worth using his material.

She refined her search and scanned again for information on the firster. Nothing. This was ridiculous. You couldn't get on the Woodstock program being that unknown. She realized he'd already started – something about jokers and thieves. She punched in some of the lyrics to search and turned on the Virt, where she saw the same view as the Real. She quickly checked her connections. Everything was okay. He was just letting the onsite cameras take his image.

It was the trademark of the Merry Prankster (aka Coyote, aka R. Obake-san, aka Li Po, depending on what overlay base was in vogue). She flipped over to Flat. The Prankster did all his video work in Flat.

He – if it was a he and not a she or a group of people working either together or separately – usually was content just to pirate broadcast or hack his way onto the big networks. He'd do a song, sometimes one the audience knew, but often something so obscure that Jessica suspected he wrote some of them himself. When the song was over, he'd disappear into the Real, untraceable. Occasionally someone made a guest appearance using the Prankster's persona. Evidently Woodstock 2044 was being so honored.

There wasn't much interesting on the Flat either. Just video from the movie: long lines of people walking; innumerable cars stopped in the giant traffic jam; people taking down the fence, walking into the festival for free. He'd superimposed the images on a backdrop of the Manhattan Wall, losing the pastoral imagery that had been gaining big royalties all weekend. Not that the Prankster cared about royalties. Here and there in the Woodstock crowd he overlayered an image of a Fare person – barefoot, in rags, holding a shovel or rake – going in through the broken fence or staring at the line of useless cars.

Her readout returned the full lyrics of the song. It was Dylan, a typical song of the period, a quasi-narrative that lost its thread somewhere in the middle. People waiting on a watchtower for something to happen. The joker worried about the meaning of life and the thief telling him it was too late for falsehoods. Women coming and going, animals getting restless. You had to give Dylan credit for creating a sense of impending doom with no real cause.

Let us not talk falsely now caught her attention, a remnant from an era that believed in a firm Reality. If only she could live where her truth about Jaykwees didn't contradict hundreds of hours of reality he'd constructed for the fans. If only she'd figured out earlier how to work the fans herself. But it was too late now.

Still, there were a lot of powerful images in this song. Maybe she could use it to assert the new reality she was trying to create: The Critic Separate from the Artist. Women waiting, that was the key. She made a quick search and pulled up a stock file of a knight riding toward a castle. She manipulated her own image, placing it on the battlements, walking back and forth. The knight became Jaykwees, riding up to the castle to find the drawbridge closed. She pulled up the Jimi Hendrix audio of the song, dubbed in a few changes, one rider instead of two, one woman on the battlements. Yes, this would work. A simple *no*, reminding the fans that she had left Jaykwees to have freedom to be the Critic unhindered by being part of his art.

She reviewed the lyrics. The wildcat growling. Great image. She pulled up a virtimage of a panther, black as night with moon-yellow eyes, and an image of herself, one of the more savage shots from the honeymoon video with her growling in chains. She dissolved her image to that of the panther. Maybe Jaykwees would take the hint and back off.

She glanced at the stage; the Prankster was close to the end. She added the title to her work, *The Lady Came and Went*, and sent it to the VirtEditor AI.

Switching to Flat, she watched the end of the Prankster's video, a jester carving out the title *All Along the Watchtower* on the Manhattan Wall. Cracks spread from the carving, destroying the wall on the final chord.

"Ten seconds to live broadcast, nine…" her headset intoned over the polite applause of the Real audience. She queued her edited video for broadcast.

"The Merry Prankster graces Woodstock 2044 with his presence playing a song by Bob Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, who once lived in Woodstock himself. I'd like to show you my own version of that wonderful old song." She started her video.

She didn't need to look at the schedule for the next performer. It was Hedda Rose, the self-appointed flower child of the Sixties revival. The rumor was that she'd gotten on the bill because she was sleeping with Ho Kim, the digital rights mogul who had engineered the revival.

Why he picked the Sixties was something of a mystery. Ho said that polls he'd commissioned indicated the audience wanted change and that's what the Sixties' music was about. But Jessica wasn't convinced. Of course the audience wanted change. With global warming, constant economic upheaval, and increasing pressure to lower the population by whatever means, who didn't want change? But that didn't translate into a certain type of music.

There was lots of music about change: punk rock, UFO cult hymns from the Waiting in the '20s, South African mbube… The overlay base wasn't important. What counted was how you packaged it. The audience only needed to think they were getting what they wanted.

Hedda Rose was a perfect example of that. She had joined the Magical Mystery Tour barely able to lip-sync to Janis Joplin, let alone play a guitar, though the other musicians had managed to at least look like they were making music with the screechy old things. Her poll numbers were in the cellar, but she had a plan. She let rumors circulate that she had a drug problem like Joplin's. Then she checked into a twelve-step hideaway. As the 'Sixties Revolution' was getting into full swing, she emerged teary-eyed, repentant and sober – which wasn't hard since she'd never touched a mind-altering substance in her life.

The fans loved it, rewarding her with high enough ratings that she could afford to hire a crew for her Virt work. All of which meant that, even without needing to clear the stage from the Prankster's performance, she would need well over twenty minutes to set up.

Jessica queued up several advirts, the Virt file of the Emperor welcoming the new Woodstock Nation to Japan – at least virtually, no one was actually here except Sapporo residents who didn't mind risking sun exposure – and the retrospective on Hedda's work that Jessica had prepared the week before. She was proud of that piece. It presented Hedda's work in such excruciating detail that by the time Hedda started her live performance the fans should be deep into repeats of other performers' material.

Her earphones chimed and the Handler program said, "A call from Jaykwees Leonard."

Jessica closed her eyes for a moment. Could she put him off again? Probably not a good idea. She still didn't know for sure if he even wanted them to be together or how he had taken her commentary. Though talking to him was always a risk, he was so manipulative. Maybe without his image she'd be less vulnerable. "Put it through, audio only."

"Hi, Jess."

"Hi yourself. Great performance." Jessica's fingers busily called up the latest ratings while she spoke. Jaykwees' downloads had already gone gold. Her reply was selling well, too.

"Seen the latest polls?"

"Haven't had a chance. Who do they think the Prankster is this time?"

"Oh, I meant the polls about you and me."

"What about you and me?" She was wary. Jaykwees was always more savvy about the audience than she was. If she wanted to survive, she had to pay attention.

"About 80% think we should get back together."

That was no surprise. No reason to get upset. "As I remember, that's about the same percentage that thought we should break up."

She pulled up the numbers and checked the demographics. Not just the same number of people; basically the same people.

"They have trouble entertaining themselves. They need our dynamism in their lives, Jess."

She felt panic heading for her stomach and pushed it back to oblivion. "You're not seriously proposing that we remarry?" She called up his image. Maybe seeing him was better for figuring out what he was really after.

"Not me. The fans made a clear statement. We only need to respond."

"I'll never go back," she whispered, then, louder and firmly, "I showed them I needed to be separate from you in order for my work to have meaning. The Artist and the Critic are incompatible. They just need to remember; they'll change their minds again."

"Jessie, when are you going to learn? There is no art, no criticism; there's only story. You created a fine conflict for them when you left. Some of your best work. But it's played itself out. They've seen you become an independent critic. Now they want to move on to the next conflict. You have to give them what they want." His voice hardened. "Unless you want to end up like the rest of your family."

She most certainly did not want to end up like them. And she would have if it hadn't been for Jaykwees. She was just out of college, looking for work, when she'd met him. He was with post-production at VirtSat, perfecting his editing skills before making his break. If not for the job he'd gotten her in research, she would have ended up on the Fare when her parents went bankrupt.

She was suddenly cold. There were worse places to go besides back to Jaykwees. She should hide her fear from him, not let him manipulate her this way, but she didn't know how. It was as if he knew all her fears before she registered them herself.

She swallowed. "Look, Jaykwees, I don't have time now. Let's talk about it later."

"Very well, my lady." Jaykwees' virtimage sketched a bow. "But not too late. Our fickle fans won't wait forever." The virtimage disappeared, replaced by the demographic breakdown of the poll favoring their remarriage.

Jessica hurriedly wiped it from her view and checked on Hedda's progress. Things were almost ready. No time to strategize now. Accessing the retrospective, she was gratified to see that about 60% of the total audience was watching reruns. The Virt audience was mostly re-viewing Jaykwees' performance or her edited version of the same. The Fare in several places, including New York, had voted to re-view the Prankster's original performance. Well, there was no accounting for taste.

Hedda appeared on stage to the cheers of the live audience, and Jessica switched to Virt. It was useless watching Hedda in the Real. She had no presence at all.

Hedda's virtimage was wearing a light, cotton, sunshine-yellow dress and an acoustic guitar. There were sandals on her feet and flowers in her hair. Jessica was surprised that Hedda hadn't opted for tie-dye and Indian prints. Maybe the yellow was a thematic element in the performance.

At the sounding of the first chord, Jessica saw that she had been right. The sun in the Virt shone mellowly down on the crowd as the chords resolved themselves into Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock'.

The music unfolded lazily while happy tie-dye-clad hippies held hands and walked through the flowers. The song itself referenced getting back to the garden, and Hedda outdid herself with gardens upon gardens. The final chorus added golden stardust falling from the sun on the naked couple amidst the foliage. The Virt zoomed in on them. Jessica expected the hippie lovers from the movie. Instead it was Jaykwees…and Hedda!

Jessica laughed. What a ludicrous idea! Except for a very refined taste in kitsch, Hedda had no talent. Jaykwees would bury her, not that Hedda would notice. Besides, he'd never consider Hedda. He liked something that would fight back, at least for a while.

Though if the fans thought it was an interesting idea, he might. The manipulation of the fans was a delicate art which sometimes required letting them take over. Jessica had a momentary flash that this drive to remarry might have nothing to do with Jaykwees' own desires. It might be some blip in the ratings that he'd pounced on this morning.

"Ten seconds to live broadcast. Nine, eight…" the voice in her ear intoned. Jessica called up her virtimage.

"This is Jessica Mason coming to you from Woodstock 2044. That was Hedda Rose, doing 'Woodstock', a song composed by Joni Mitchell to commemorate the original event. Let's listen to Joni do it." Jessica called up a file of Mitchell doing 'Woodstock' at Big Sur. The file was a Flat, only recently enhanced to Virt, a far superior product to a live performance by Hedda Rose.

She queued up several advirts and quickly scanned the polls. The percentage favoring her remarriage to Jaykwees had dropped to 50%; 30% now favored Jaykwees marrying Hedda. Jaykwees had been right. The fans weren't going to wait forever. They'd hardly waited an hour.

But she still needed time to find a way out of this mess. She glanced at the schedule. Next there was an hour break. Most of that time was covered by canned material and the news, but she needed to supply an interview of someone at the festival. After the break, a royalty analysis would determine who did the encore. It would be Jaykwees, of course. Following the encore, Jessica would present a comment on the day's events. Surely most of the audience wouldn't expect a definitive statement from her until then.

She wanted to convince the fans that she shouldn't go back to Jaykwees. She wondered vaguely if she could make them understand that more than her work was involved; she felt smothered by Jaykwees. Every facet of her life was subsumed in his work. Toward the end she'd had trouble eating or sleeping, wondering what use he'd make of it. Maybe the fans would see that her life was more than his art.

The problem with that narrative was that Jaykwees had a counter-story for it: the artist's wife who didn't understand the sacrifices needed for great art. That story could destroy her career. A critic who didn't understand Jaykwees Leonard's work wasn't going to be a critic very long. If she was going to get out of this, she needed a different approach. One that wouldn't backfire.

But right now she'd better find someone to interview.

Surveying the crowd, she spied a petite Japanese girl covered head to foot in a tie-dyed kimono in unlikely shades of brown and blue. Her conical straw hat nearly covered her face, but, as Jessica approached her with the microphone, a shy smile of recognition lit her face.

"Hi, I'm Jessica Mason from VirtSat. I'd like to ask you why you came to the festival?"

The girl bowed. "Ms Mason-san, I came to the festival because I want the whole world to know that we must plant a garden again, so that the plants can absorb the greenhouse gases and the global warming will be reversed."

Jessica bowed in return. "Do you think the concert will help increase carbon-sequestration planting?" As if there was any more land that could be used for that purpose and still leave enough to grow food for twelve billion.

The girl paused, no doubt carefully translating her reply into English. Jessica hoped it would continue being short and insipid. The polls were clear; the audience wouldn't watch politics for long. They had a virtual sun shining benevolently on them; they didn't want to think about greenhouse gases or global warming or the human die-back. If the girl kept it up, Jessica would have to find someone else to interview. Of course, the next one might be worse: a Radical Buddhist demonstrating their compassion for the Earth by committing suicide on camera, or a Daughter of Artemis demanding Jessica sign the pledge to have her ovaries destroyed.

Just as the girl started her reply, a taller girl, decked out in the latest UV Reflective-Wear, ran up and whispered in her ear. A short conversation in Japanese ensued, of which Jessica caught only "ask her." Finally the girl in the kimono turned back to her. "My friend would like to know if you will marry Mr Leonard-san at the festival?"

Jessica almost sighed with relief. Personal revelations were a lot better than politics. But what could she say? She hadn't figured it out yet. Maybe if she was indecisive, the girls would help her get a sense of how the audience viewed the situation.

"It's so difficult to decide. Our marriage wasn't good for my career." That seemed both tentative and safe.

"Career is important," the English-speaker agreed. "But now you have established yourself. Time to think again about love."

Jaykwees had nailed it. The Critic vs The Artist had played itself out. Maybe she could nuance the story and revive the interest.

"What if I'm not really his one true love? Perhaps Hedda Rose is a better partner for him. At least she's an artist too."

"Oh, no!" There was vigorous shaking of heads. "Ms Rose-san is not right for him. How could there be anyone but you? You understand his work. You are his greatest inspiration. Love will conquer your difficulties."

Jessica was stunned by the trap that lay before her. Had Jaykwees known from the time that he'd agreed to the divorce that the fans would figure out a way to force them back together? Something of her distress must have communicated itself to the girls. They were consulting again.

"Mr Leonard-san is so sorry about the break up." The girl in UV wear echoed the word "sorry." "He will help make things work when you are together again."

Jessica couldn't imagine what they had ever seen in Jaykwees' work that would make them think he was sorry about anything. He'd even refused to divorce her until the ratings looked auspicious. Still, she needed to move this along. She switched to Japanese and asked pre-scripted questions about their lives (college girls) and their plans for the future (Virt stars). Just before she closed, the articulate one changed back to English, no doubt sensing how little Japanese Jessica understood.

"Please, do not be cruel to Mr Leonard-san. He wants you. He needs you. Forgive him and take him back."

Jessica remembered when she thought Jaykwees had wanted her. Wanted her intellect and her feedback, a sharpener for his wit. But what he really seemed to want was a character in the ever-unfolding psycho-drama he fed to the fans. And it appeared they wanted that too. She bowed. "Arigato. I'll think over what you've said." She cut the camera and checked the time. She asked the girls for the addresses of their virtimages and had them sign the standard royalty agreement. Bowing to them once again, she withdrew and fed the live footage from the interview and the Virt addresses to the Editor.

Queuing the edited interview for broadcast, Jessica again thought about what to do. It wasn't a matter of forgiving him; he was just being himself. But he was strangling her.

And she certainly didn't want to be seen as *not* forgiving him. That wouldn't look good at all, unless…

She didn't have to be nice, just popular. She could refuse to forgive him, reject his apparent-to-everyone-but-her contrition, throw him at Hedda and laugh at both of them when it didn't work out.

There was great video for that. Madonna for one. Or footage from the Woodstock movie with the portable toilet guy – something about flushing Jaykwees out of her life. With R. Bungaku-san lyrics. Rewriting Japanese Automata was a snap, since the original never quite made sense anyway.

She started calling up images and lyrics, piecing together a cold and haughty rejection. He was unworthy of her attention. She had better things to do.

While she was working, the news started. Jessica had expected the rumors about Jaykwees and her would top the news, but instead the anchors had chosen hard news. She continued working, giving the news only part of her attention. As barefoot peasants walked around her in Virt, Lois Wenthert's voiceover said, "In an odd tribute to the Woodstock anniversary, the Fare folk of upstate New York have decided to recreate the traffic jam that crippled the first festival. Using draft animals and old gas-guzzlers evidently pulled from junkyards and fueled with who knows what, they have dragged farm equipment, huge pieces of scrap and even their fematrailers to I-87, where they have set them up as barricades, effectively shutting down the Washington-Montreal corridor. Many are digging up the road. More are headed for the Manhattan Wall, a trip that will take some of them weeks. The NA Guard is mobilizing."

Jessica wondered who the poor bastard actually outside the Wall being overlayered by Lois was. No way was it Lois herself. When her salary had increased enough to be able to afford to live inside the Wall, she swore that she'd never leave its protective (and status-enhancing – though Lois didn't say that) enclosure again.

The scene changed to a split view between Tony Mann, VirtSat's standby anchor, and Lois' overlay at the scene.

"Lois, are you able to determine what they want?"

"It's difficult, Tony. They don't all know themselves. Let's interview this gentleman." The camera turned toward a cleanish-looking man with a rusty hoe on his shoulder. Jessica wondered if he had been pre-selected for his ability to speak English. Lois' Spanglish was non-existent.

"What are you trying to accomplish, sir?"

The man smiled directly at the camera. Definitely not one of the Fare-grown. He had an education. Probably forced onto the Fare by a bad business decision like Jessica's father. It was amazing how a few bad decisions could unravel your life.

"We're following the Prankster."

"I don't understand. The Prankster was last reported in Sapporo, Japan."

"The hour's getting late." The man raised his index finger and pinkie making the Jackass, the Prankster's hand sign, and moved out of camera range.

Lois' image turned to the camera. "As you can see, Tony, I'm not getting coherent answers, though it does seem to be tied to the Prankster's appearance at Woodstock 2044."

"Do you think the NA Guard will be able to straighten this mess up?"

"It's going to take time. There are literally tens of thousands of vehicles stranded on the road. It'll be hard to get tanks up here. And they've disabled the high-speed railroad, as usual."

"Is this going to affect the food supply in Manhattan?"

"The mayor says not. He called for calm, pointing out the stockpiles of food inside the Wall. He has also contacted the New Jersey Fare administration about filling in any shortfall."

"Thank you, Lois." Mann turned to the audience as Lois' overlay dissolved. "Evidently just another nuisance caused by the Fare folk, this one in reaction to the 75th anniversary of Woodstock. It's uncanny how much the Virt files of the two events look alike."

The view shifted to a split-screen with a flyover of the current I-87 on one side and virt-enhanced footage from the movie of the hippies flooding into Bethel. Jessica was amused by how much the hippies resembled the Fare folk. Hopefully the Fare folk were only looking for "three days of peace, love, and music." Whatever they wanted, they were going to end up back on their farms. They should know how lucky they were to have that. There were countries where people like them were just locked up in camps to starve to death. If you couldn't do work a robot couldn't do, why should you be allowed to put your carbon footprint on the planet at all?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Tony Mann's voice. "At the current Woodstock festival, Jaykwees Leonard placed viewers in suspense by hinting he wanted to renew his relationship with VirtSat's own VJ, Jessica Mason. Jessica has so far remained uncommitted. But Hedda Rose, in her performance just before the intermission, indicated that she would be interested if Ms Mason wasn't."

This was followed by footage of Hedda gushing about how happy she'd be to marry Jaykwees. Jessica hoped Virtsat had charged Hedda for the coverage. Though she had to admit that building up the controversy was in their interest and even her own. Her reply and new attitude were certainly going to be a surprise, one she hoped they'd all be pleased with.

"Twenty seconds to live broadcast, nineteen…"

Jessica pulled up her virtimage, programmed it for an enigmatic smile.

"This is Jessica Mason, live from Woodstock 2044 on VirtSat. We're waiting for the official announcement of who's to do the encore, though looking at the sales figures its pretty clear who it will be." She displayed sales graphs for the audience showing Jaykwees clearly ahead.

After the official announcement, Jaykwees took the stage immediately. Obviously, he'd been told ahead of time to set up. He carried the white Fender Stratocaster – Jimi Hendrix's guitar. Was he planning on outdoing her Hendrix quote? Pre-empt her response by rejecting her? Accept Hedda? The live audience echoed her tension.

He adjusted the tuning, letting the tension build. The audience around her rose to its feet. Jessica switched to Virt. Whatever he was going to do in Real, it was the Virt that counted.

Instead of striking a chord, he pulled one ringing note, then another. In three or four notes she realized it was a copy of Hendrix's version of the 'Star Spangled Banner', his last number at Woodstock.

Slowly the sun appeared on the horizon in the Virt, its rays rose-colored. Did that indicate he'd take Hedda? Then the ramparts appeared, taken from Jessica's watchtower, with Jessica and Hedda both looking over the wall. At the base, one wailing musician, guitar in hand, plucked the notes with his teeth, the feedback reverberating as the sky lightened. When the bombs burst Hedda's stardust appeared in the sky. But no garden. No army to take one or the other woman off the wall. Just the two women, the guitarist, and the sky.

When the USNA had asked Jaykwees to compose a new national anthem to replace the three anthems of Canada, Mexico and the US, he joked that by getting rid of the 'Star Spangled Banner' they were doing away with the only national anthem ever to ask a question without answering it.

So, he was going to leave the choice completely up to her. It should have been a relief, but she knew better. Randomness had no part in his aesthetic. He may have made it look like her decision, but only because he was sure of her answer.

She queued advirts and documentary files to run while she polished her commentary. She couldn't deliberate much longer. She pulled up the latest opinion polls. Hedda and Jaykwees were seen as a bad couple who wouldn't last. The fans wanted Jessica to answer yes, create another true love story. What would happen when she gave them the Lover Turned Bitch? She knew she could make it work. But what if she was wrong?

Then, like the dawn in the video, she saw what was happening. Jaykwees had indeed been sure she would say yes.

In fact, by giving her the last word, he had ensured her answer. He was highlighting her work. The fans would see that as an acknowledgement of its importance. If she said no, they would interpret it, not just as a rejection of his love, but as an inability to understand what he was doing. Even if they liked the new persona, they'd wonder if she really knew how to do her job. Her ratings would drop. She'd be a falling commodity, a problem to be replaced by something fresh.

The suffocation she'd learned to live with during her marriage settled on her, familiar, easier to deal with than a more uncertain future. But her work was still important. Jaykwees had at least given her that. She needed a clever way to complete the love story the fans yearned for. A love song? Maybe R. Sakuhin-san's ballad 'Love/Disaster = Yes/no?'. She might be able to build on the disaster theme later.

No, that was all wrong. She needed something light, maybe silly, certainly Sixties.

Of course. Paul McCartney. What could be better?

But not his solo period. Too obvious. Something earlier, when he was with the group. She called up his song titles.

There it was. A few lyric changes. Some video images from Jaykwees' encore. She threw them into the Editor while typing in the lyric changes.

Maybe it would be better this time. Maybe he really was sorry. And she would keep the Bitch in reserve, bring her out when she'd prepared the ground better. That might keep him from subsuming her.

"Ten seconds to live broadcast, nine…"

"This is Jessica Mason at Woodstock 2044. I have only one reply to today's events." She queued the file and watched with the rest of the world.

McCartney's voice simulation sang, "Yes today." Stairs appeared on the wall as Jessica's image joined that of Jaykwees, leaving her troubles, and Hedda, behind. They walked to the garden to hide away. "Oh, I am saying yes today."

Just before the end, a newsflash ran along the bottom of the video. "New Jersey Fare Folk form flotilla. Attack Wall with explosives – Millions counted on the road – Other cities threatened – Details when Woodstock coverage ends." She wondered what in the world they thought they could accomplish by doing that. ✪

Billie Aul lives with her husband in upstate New York, though not on a subsistence farm. She missed the original Woodstock as well as its anniversaries. Her fiction has previously appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*. Some of her non-fiction has appeared in *Foundation*.

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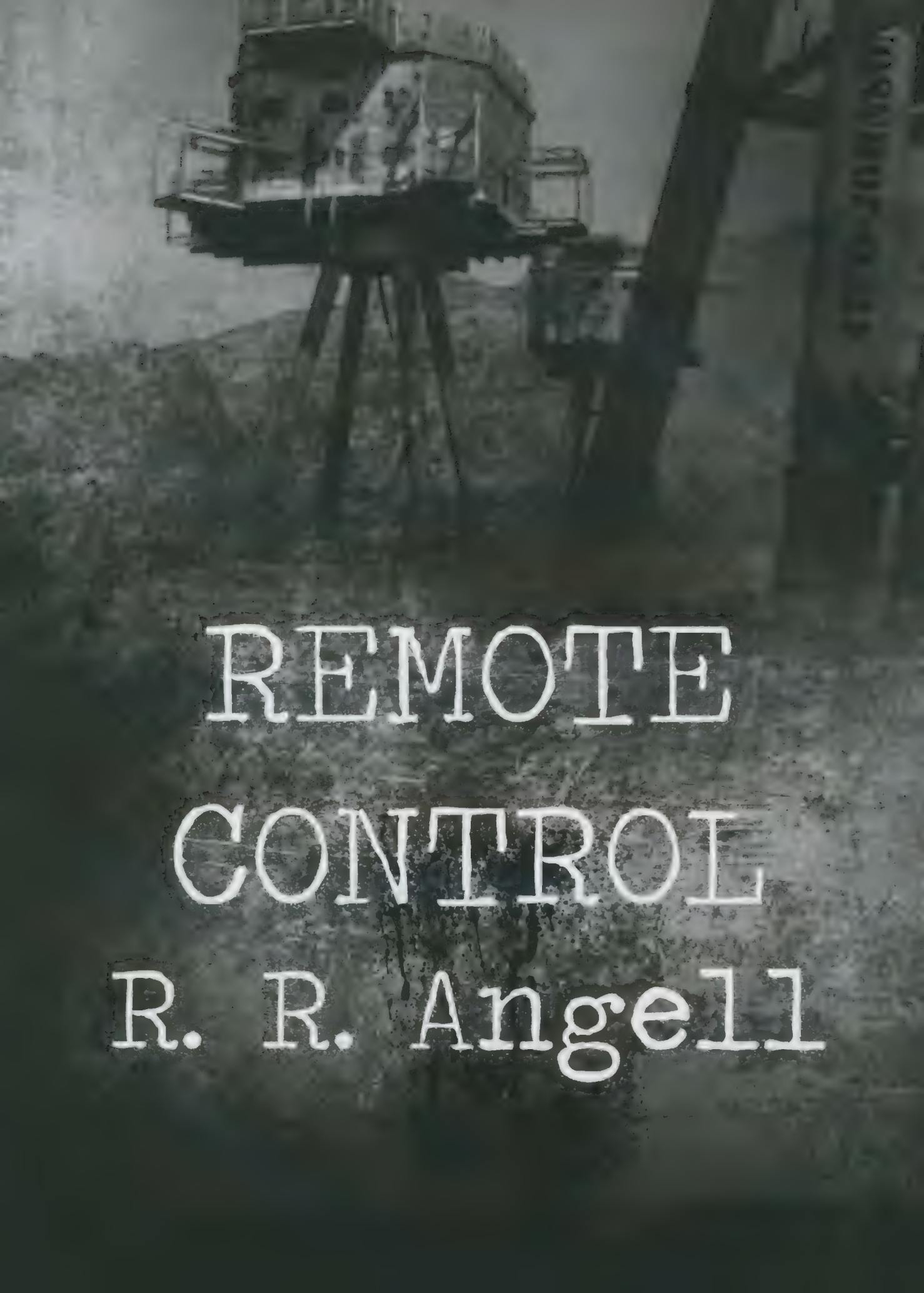
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CONRAD WILLIAMS	MELANIE LAZI
CODY GOODFELLOW	NIN[illegible]
LISA TUTTLE	TONY RICHARDS
JOEL LANE	GARY FRY
MATTHEW HOLNESS	ANDREW HUMPHREY
ALEXANDER GLASS	IAN R. FAULKNER
KATHLEEN WINTER	SIMON AVERY
M.K. HOBSON	GARY MCMAHON
STEVE RASNIC TEM	CHRISTOPHER M. CEVASCO
SCOTT NICHOLSON	ERIC GREGORY
WILL MCINTOSH	CHRISTOPHER FOWLER
DANIEL KAYSEN	STEPHEN VOLK
LYNDA E. RUCKER	MIKE O'DRISCOLL
JAMIE BARRAS	PETER TENNANT

FOUR

TRANSMISSIONS FROM BEYOND

R.R. Angell was born under a full moon, far from any desert. He likes sheep, except for the human variety, and often wonders which animal currently has more freedom. This story is dedicated to his mom who laughed in all the right places. To find out more, please visit his website: www.rrangell.com




REMOTE
CONTROL
R. R. Angell

It happened right in the middle of my shift. I'd been flipping, as usual, through the thirty-two thumbnails of empty, peaceful desert arrayed across the bottom of my wall screen. The map of my surveillance territory encompassed 1,000 Atco-Johnson Perimeter Stations that ruled 62 miles of Mexican border; one station every 100 meters. Thirty-two stations were awake; the rest were waiting for proximity sensors to give them something to do.

The border alarms down near the town of Las Cruce went off and two perimeter alarms turned red on my screen, the ones around them turned yellow. That made a three hundred meter ingress, so it was either a lot of runners, a few runners spread far apart, or a herd of something.

So then the fun started. The big screen switched automatically to the closest Johnson, but I didn't see anything out there. Amber light washed over me from the alert board over my head, but nobody's asking questions yet.

"Yo, Mac. What's shaken over there?" my buddy, Dobson, said in the next workstation.

"Lemmings looking for a cliff, Dobie," I said.

"Coming my way?"

"Nope. All mine."

"Lucky stiff. I got no action for days."

"Here they come," I said, and like that the Johnson queues stacked right up, with most of them in a perfect distribution around the closest turret bot. How the riders know this shit, I'll never know. I couldn't see a thing.

It's all about the riders, mostly twelve to fifty-eight year-old guys, all angst and aggression with nowhere to put it. Women, between twenty-three and fifty-four, with clusters centered around thirty, forty, and fifty years of age, account for about twenty percent.

Used to be they surfed in on the web, but the controls were hard to work. Now they log in from home or from corporate playrooms on all the major gaming platforms, except for that one from a Buddhist company in Oregon. Patriots lined up by the millions in the stores, and then online.

I heard that some guy named Johnson came up with the Web-Cam-Servo-Rifle combo, but I don't know that for certain. Every Johnson bot is solar powered, and that really tears up the environmentalists; they don't know if they should applaud or protest. The Patriots got 'em outnumbered anyway, and with better slogans like 'Protect Our Borders, Protect Our Jobs' they get all the good press. But they don't see what I see.

Who'd have thought folks would pay five bucks for three shots and the privilege of staring at empty desert landscapes for up to ten minutes? Most times they end up trimming the witch mesquite in their last thirty seconds. They've already killed just about every cactus within range.

The enviro people are all over us for that. Cactus huggers, my commander calls them, and the Saguaro Faction is especially nasty. At first, they wanted to go down there and put up shields to deflect the bullets. They lost three members in three attempts, and then realized it was hopeless. It's all in the hands of the lawyers now, and everyone has to certify they know they are using live ammunition at login.

The map down the left side of my screen showed the US border lit up with sensor lights. To the right was my field of Johnson turrets. The awake gunbots were bright green, the ones with riders blink.

The riders come in and queue up for the closest gun. When the queue hits three deep, it wakes up nearby guns so more riders can hop into a live gunbot.

It started with five riders, so I went to work and called up the stats by type and location.

Platform CodeLocation
VR501Calphalon, NJ
VR501Billings, MT
612Hainertown, MI
963Dewey Beach, DE
UIDUnknown

At this time of day, the riders were most likely kids, but I ran the commerce checks anyway; standard ops, top to bottom.

The first rider was Robbie Tremo, 13, stepping in from a VR unit in Jersey. I knew him by the bragger profile he kept; no kills yet, but he scored a maiming on his last bullet on May seventeenth. Everyone in his junior high signed up after that.

The next kid was in a time zone where he should still be in school. I didn't boot him, but I wanted to. Not my job to judge the riders, just to monitor them, and the kid's credit was good. He might be out sick.

Next was Amy Saffel, 48 years old, in on a credit card through her husband's game station. She'd been on for over an hour doing her bit for Secure Our National Borders, or maybe she was blowing off steam. I guessed anger management over SONB since she was averaging less than five minutes for each three-round session. I had no idea what she was shooting at. Go get 'em, girl.

The fourth was just a guy in an internet café with a stolen credit card. The commerce checks on the first four came up with no surprises. It was that fifth one, the unidentified one, that triggered the alarms in my head.

So I contacted Legal, just like I'm supposed to do.

"Yeah, Station A47? What's the scoop?"

"I've got an unidentified Rider with no location," I said into my headset.

"I'll be right there." She clicked off. The situation light outside my station flashed orange.

The kid in Billings dropped his third round and was replaced by someone from Ontario, Canada. I terminated him immediately. Sometimes foreigners do get in, and maybe they squeeze off a round, but not on my watch. If one of them killed or maimed a runner, there would be all kinds of trouble. Like the training says, if someone breaks into your house and you kill them it is self-defense; a homeowner has the right to do that. They call it the Castle Precedent, and it changed the way we do everything.

Only Americans patrol our borders. It would be illegal otherwise.

Next thing I know, Legal is in the room. She's big, and old. Her lavender perfume surrounds me and I want to surrender and go get some fresh air.

"How many, Private?"

"The deepest queue right now is fifteen, Ma'am, but Johnsons are waking up all over the place and shifting the players." I pointed at the three staggered rows of gunbots. The little block of stats next to each one showed queue depth, time remaining, shots remaining in session, and barrel temperature.

Maintenance and reloading is automatic. Each bot can fire a round every ten seconds for a month without intervention or overheating. My sector was overdue and slated to be restocked next week, but activity this month had been low. Plenty of ammo left.

Legal pushed in next to me and poked at the border lights, the LCD wall dimpled under her finger.

"Please don't touch my screen, Ma'am," I said, pulling up the area distribution of riders. It made a perfect bell-curve around the ingress.

"Have you called Marketing?"

"No, Ma'am."

She popped her COM watch off her wrist and fiddled with it. I was still trying to see what had tripped the border sensors. I switched from gunbot view to a more powerful central camera and zoomed in as I elevated the lens. The image jerked back and forth.

"What's that? Wind? I don't see any wind out there."

"No, Ma'am. It's just my surveillance camera telescoping up. The riders saw something moving out there and shot at it. Some of them got lucky and hit me."

Marketing bounced into the room, a skinny, hyperactive guy named Mark. "Nice," he said. "We should put things out there for target practice. Bring in more happy riders."

Bring in more cash is what he meant. I heard they were raking in over ten million dollars a month with the rider software alone, not to mention a strong subscription base. That's a lot of surveillance. First time a government agency had ever run a profit.

Then there was the prison system. They set up rider-monitored kill zones around fifty terrorist prisons scattered across the country and successful escapes dropped to zero. Early in the program they had problems getting the guards in and out, but they fixed that. I can't say how, it's classified.

"What's going on here?" Mark the marketing guy said, tapping my screen where the distribution curve seemed to spike.

"I'm not sure, but don't touch my screen." I pulled up the stats on the Johnson with the oversized queue. It was the UID, and I decided to call him Rider One. The readout said Rider One had been in for thirteen minutes and taken five shots. "Looks like someone's getting a free ride. I'll boot him."

He didn't boot. I ran another commerce background check on him and came up with zilch. No name, no purchase profile, no credit history. Nothing. I called up his CPU registration mark. Nada.

"Who is this guy?" Legal said. "More importantly, *where* is he?"

I tried a different trace. Nothing. I couldn't tell if he was inside the country and that was bad.

"And why here?" Legal reached in and traced her finger over the map cutting a momentary trough of light through the riders.

"That's government property, Ma'am. Please, don't touch my screen." These people had no respect.

Then I saw the pattern.

"This guy, let's call him Rider One, isn't a guy at all."

"What do you mean?" Mark said.

"Look at the IP addresses for him. They are completely non-routable, and they shift like a kaleidoscope."

"And non-routable means?"

"An IP address like that has to be inside our own network to work, but it isn't. See here," I said, indicating the readouts. "Here's his signal. The trace says the packets are coming in from all over, not just by one or two routes. It's like confetti. That's why I can't boot him. Watch," I said.

I keyed the dump sequence and a second later Rider One disappeared.

"You were saying?" Legal said.

"Look!" Mark said, stabbing the screen two Johnsons up.

"Don't touch – "

"He's right there, at the head of the line!"

And damned if Mark wasn't right. Now, how the hell did Rider One do that? It disappeared and hopped to the front of the queue on another gunbot.

"There!"

Mark's hand jabbed for the screen and I caught it at the wrist. Mark whimpered. I have a strong grip. "Sorry, but what'd I say?" Onscreen, Rider One jumped from Johnson to Johnson until it found the one closest to the ingress. In all the excitement, I'd almost forgotten that there were targets coming through the border perimeter. I zoomed in.

"I'll have to call the General." Ms Legal heaved herself upright and fiddled with her COM watch.

A carpet of dirty sheep was surging across the desert border like the Kansas City Chiefs swarming over a virtual first-down line. The Johnsons were up and ready, locked and loaded, ready for action. And I could feel them all, like some sort of cyber-salivating multi-conscious force hell-bent on just one thing.

It was the perfect deterrent for runners. Except these were sheep, and they didn't have a clue until the first three feet of wool erupted in blood.

They panicked and scattered northwest, deeper into the US kill-zone, blood-streaked sheep hopping over fallen bodies and getting blown apart in mid-air.

"The kids must love that," the Marketeer said, like he was in church. "Can you check to see how many slo-mo replays this is getting? That's the latest feature at a nickel a view, and it's accessible world-wide."

That got Legal's attention. "You're kidding, right?"

No answer, so I figure there must be a liability issue, but General Fanning stomped into the room right then. His chest medals clacked as he stopped behind me.

"At ease, Private," he ordered, not that I had time to salute or anything. "What are you doing, son?"

"I'm working up replay statistics for the marketing guy, Sir!" I put the results in a tiny window so Mark would have to squint, and slid it as far to the right as possible.

"Mutton for dinner, eh, Rose?" the General said, huffing a laugh behind me.

"I don't know, Randall. Do they make lamb enchiladas down there?"

The sheep were flying apart like some special effect in the latest New Zealand blockbuster.

"That's just plain wrong," the General said. "Did you guys install machine guns out there?"

The General was right, and not because of his rank this time. There were far too many bullets flying; Rider One was humping it out like there was no tomorrow, and his Johnson overheated and shut down. Then he disappeared, and some poor kid stepped in and had to wait for the barrel to cool. He could spend his whole ten minutes just looking around without being able to shoot.

The scene calmed, and the sheep steered further northwest behind a bloody wall of bodies. There was a slight breeze tickling the brush from the southwest, so the warning smell of carnage would be blowing away from the herd.

Marketing was happy. "Look at these replay numbers! I'll bet we're pulling in a grand-a-minute easy."

"Your assessment, Private?"

"Sir! It appears that there is an entity, Sir."

"Explain."

"My guess is that some kid-genius built a virtual machine in some university supercomputing cluster. Then he built an entity specifically for riding."

Legal leaned on my armrest. "Is this entity alive?" She was close enough to bite off my ear.

The scene on the screen was almost pastoral except for the desert and the bloody barricade. An occasional sheep would bloom red

and fall down, so things were back to normal. No longer a barrage of bullets.

"This is great!" Marketing said. "This whole sector had silencers installed at last reload. They don't have a clue where the guns are."

I shot Mark an angry look. "Why'd you do that?"

"Better target maintenance," he said.

"As in keeping them in range longer?"

"Technically speaking, we make more that way; the queues are deeper. Not to mention that it's more effective."

"Shit," I said, shaking my head.

"Soldier! There is a lady present."

I begged to differ, but I'd take her over Marketing any day.

"Yes, Sir! Sorry, Ma'am."

She ignored me. "I asked you if this entity is alive."

"Not in the sense that it eats, pees, and – " I stopped myself. "No ma'am, not what you'd consider alive, though it can obviously interact with our reality."

"Could it be classified as a US citizen?"

"No, Ma'am. I couldn't see anyone making that claim. It could be coming from anywhere in the world."

"Shit," she said. "Shit, shit, shit."

General Fanning kept quiet. I could hear his heavy breathing as we stared at the red pile of sheep. A hoof twitched hypnotically in the stack and I wanted to look away. The General ordered, "Show me the big picture, Soldier."

I zoomed out and the carnage wasn't so in-your-face, more like a rock wall, the kind you might see around a peaceful New England field.

That's when I noticed the boy, a stick figure at this magnification, stumbling toward the frontline, all limbs and angles and uncertain centers of gravity, off to help his sheep without a thought for himself.

The General grunted, Legal said, "Oh, no," and Marketing leaned closer. I kept my eye on him.

Then Rider One showed up on Johnson 329, the gun installation closest to the shepherd. I tried booting it with no luck, so I booted the riders from the three other guns within range of the boy.

"You can't do that," Marketing said. "That's illegal."

"Equipment malfunction. Let 'em prove otherwise," I said, glancing at Legal. She frowned, and I booted the next three riders while monitoring Rider One. It seemed to be tracking but not shooting, so I called up the view from its scope.

"The bastard is waiting for a better shot," I said. "Sorry, Ma'am. Do you think it knows I'm booting the others?"

"Private," said General Fanning. "Your job is to assess the riders, not to play God."

"We've got to stop him, Randy," Ms Legal said. I nodded vigorously, as the kid jogged toward the gun at an oblique angle.

"Now, Rose – " The General sounded just like my dad had most nights.

"I mean it," she said. If this entity kills a human, it poses a liability we do not want to assume. It will be our fault. I can't think of a single legal maneuver that would stand up in court."

"It's trivial. The Private here will log all actions and then lead a team to prevent these encroachers from getting back in. Isn't that right, Private?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" I made damned sure the log was logging.

"Randall," she said. "This little triviality could undermine the entire Presidential Directive. Mexico won't cooperate if it thinks in any way that forces outside the US are enforcing this border closure. They'll say it had to do with oil, like with the Canadians. How many companies have gone bankrupt without a labor force? Our economy can't hold out forever."

"Ms Ehrenberg," General Fanning said, in a voice loud enough to stop conversations two cubicles over. "We are a resilient nation. Even with rampaging unemployment, we will survive."

"And we still can't find anyone to do the little jobs," she said. "What's wrong here, Randall?"

"We will do what we must do to maintain the integrity of these borders against illegal crossers and terrorists – "

"General Fanning," she said, just like my mom. I was starting to like the old gal. "You and I both know that terrorists don't sneak across the desert. They come through looking like saints with the best papers money can buy, and then we scratch our heads wondering where we went wrong."

I kept on booting riders. The shepherd waded through the flock, Rider One tracking his every step.

"Escuse me, Sirs." Maria had come for the trash. "Escuse me." The General and Marketing shifted out of the way, and I saw Maria's hand reach in and grab the trashcan. I got a whiff of disinfectant, and then the can fell to the floor and I heard her gasp as she staggered back against the wall.

I didn't know anything about Maria's family, but I had an idea about where they were from. She was a good, hardworking woman.

Then a team of three riders stepped in from a corporate playroom. One took a shot, followed by the other two. All three missed, but a sheep went down next to the shepherd and he stopped to see what happened to his animal. They took turns firing. One hit the boy's arm, and he looked at it.

Maria cried out so loudly I thought she had been hit. Fear for the boy hit me square in the gut, but there was nothing I could do.

The General intervened. "Mister, take that trashcan and help Ms Gonzales out to the hall."

Mark did as he was told. Maria wailed until the exit door slammed, cutting her off. Then Mark was back, but the General had taken his spot. I saw two dots in the sky that I recognized as vultures; they were already circling overhead.

Rider One opened up, cutting into the upright figure.

There were twelve guns firing out there, only four were in range. Rider One spewed lead until the kid dropped down among his flock.

They kept firing. Rider One emptied its gun and hopped on another Johnson to start it all over again. It emptied three stations of ammo, and then disappeared. I couldn't see the boy out there in the sea of dead sheep, but I knew where his body was.

Marketing broke the silence. "How much money did we make on that?"

"That would depend on if Rider One was paying with real credit," I said, raising my voice. "Go figure that out somewhere else, Sir, why don't ya?"

It was as still as the OK Corral. The breeze had died with the sheep. You could see the heat rising off the barrel, distorting the air and the view of the bloody wool carpet. The logs were capturing it all.

The first buzzard landed.

The corporate kids went after it, but only one Johnson was in range with ammo left. The third rider nailed it, and the bird fell down behind a sheep.

"Private?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Is our border secure?"

I checked ammo levels. All the guns in range were empty except

two. If it wasn't for them, someone could walk right out of Las Cruce there in the distance and untouched into America. There were a few rounds of protection left.

"Yes, Sir. We're still closed for business, Sir. No sign of Rider One."

"Good. I want your report by 08:00 tomorrow morning. I want your recommendations on how to detect these things, and your thoughts on how to keep these wolves out of our hen house. Rose is right; we can't let this get out, and we can't let it happen again."

"Yes, Sir."

"Rose, we have a Situation Cleansing Directive to attend to before any of this breaks. I'll see you and your staff in my office in ten minutes. And figure out if we have to pay for those sheep."

"Yes, General," she said.

They left me alone with Marketing. He slipped around my chair and pointed at the screen. I cleared my throat and he snatched his hand back.

"Do you think you could – " Marketing said.

"Do you think maybe you could vacate my work station?" I knew what he wanted, and I needed the count for my report anyway, so I launched the image analyzers.

One cactus stump; 69 mesquite bushes; 437 dead sheep.

"Where's the kid?" Marketing asked.

"Probably an error. I'll rerun it."

"No, look there." He pointed but did not touch.

I switched back to the main camera and zoomed in on where the boy had dropped. Something was moving. A hand reached over a dead sheep and clutched wool.

But it wasn't exactly a hand, more like a prosthetic. A disfigured head followed, dented stainless steel where the boy's fleshy covering had been shot away on the right side. No blood at all. It heaved itself upright, the torso covered in the lace-like remains of a shirt. Sunlight reflected from the thing's chest.

The Johnson within range started shooting.

"This rider better get lucky," I said. "His Johnson only has eleven rounds left."

Another buzzard landed and distracted the rider. I zoomed in as close as I could get to the shepherd. It was clearly a robot of some sort. Probably a Sony someone had adapted for herding near the border Johnsons. It had to be controlled, probably from the Cruce clock tower visible just above that dust cloud.

"I'm no economist," Mark said, "but those robots gotta cost some money, at least two million a pop, right? Whoever is behind that has some serious corporate backing. That's way too much overhead for a couple of sheep. At least nobody died. The General will be happy."

"Yeah," I said, as the buzzard flew apart.

"Nice shot," he said, like he was watching some video game.

I wanted to hit him, but I had to make sure Rider One hadn't come back. It was an engineer, Barry Cutler, recently laid off from a Honda plant in Tennessee. He spent his last two shots, one after the other, into a dead carcass.

There were five rounds left, and Rider One was back onboard.

A buzzard landed. Then another. They walk-hopped from the back of one sheep to another, pecking the eyes out and swallowing them. Two more buzzards glided in, then skittered sideways as a sheep heaved itself up from the hot sand and stumbled off.

I flipped to the rider cam and saw Rider One's crosshairs land on a little red light on the robot's neck. Then it panned away, locking on Johnson after Johnson as if to challenge.

I took control of the only other loaded gun in the corridor. In seconds, Rider One focused on me. Interesting.

"Shoot it," Marketing urged. "You've got four more bullets then it does."

I lowered the barrel, keeping Rider One in view, and shot into the dirt, four times. As expected, Rider One aimed away and buried one likewise.

"What are you doing?"

"Shut up, Sir."

"No, look there."

In another window, I saw the dust cloud was full of vehicles, coming at us fast.

"Get out of my work area, Sir, or I'll call the MPs."

Mark hesitated.

"Leave. Go now." I poked him hard, so there was no mistaking my intent. He backed out, glancing my way until he slipped through the exit.

In the desert, I buried another round. Rider One followed suit. We traded like that two more times until we had one round each. Rider One shot the dirt, nodded his barrel, then pointed it straight up like a flagpole.

My last round kicked up a puff of dust, and I pointed my gun and the other empty units at the sky, praying I was doing the right thing.

Alerts lit up all over my main control screen. My headset squawked so loud I thought everyone could hear, and I covered the earpiece with a guilty hand.

"We've got a possible open border alert in your sector, Private. Can you confirm?"

I glanced around in case Mark had come back, then saw the caravan stop to clear its path of dead sheep. There were dozens of old trucks with men, women, and kids huddled together inside. More were charging in from Las Cruce now hidden in the distance behind the growing dust cloud.

My heart pounded in my chest. What the hell was I doing?

"Private! Can you confirm?"

Shit. "Sir!" I said, my voice cracking, so I cleared my throat to get it under control and lied. "This should be a low ammo alert, Sir, but there appears to be a malfunction. We're still secure. I'm tracking the problem down now." I took a steadying breath and went on, calmer now. "We had a little action today, so I'll need a priority reload tomorrow, or in the next couple days at the latest."

The first truck passed my gunbot, faces pressed against the dusty windows. Something warm welled up inside me.

"Very well, Private. I'll bump your reload up the list. Carry on." He clicked off.

I leaned back and watched the rider queues stack up on the gunbots out of range as the trucks threaded through. I might have sighed.

"Hey," Dobie called out from next door. "You okay in there?"

I was shaking. Rider One hadn't killed anyone. It had just helped clear the way in. There were bound to be related malfunctions, right?

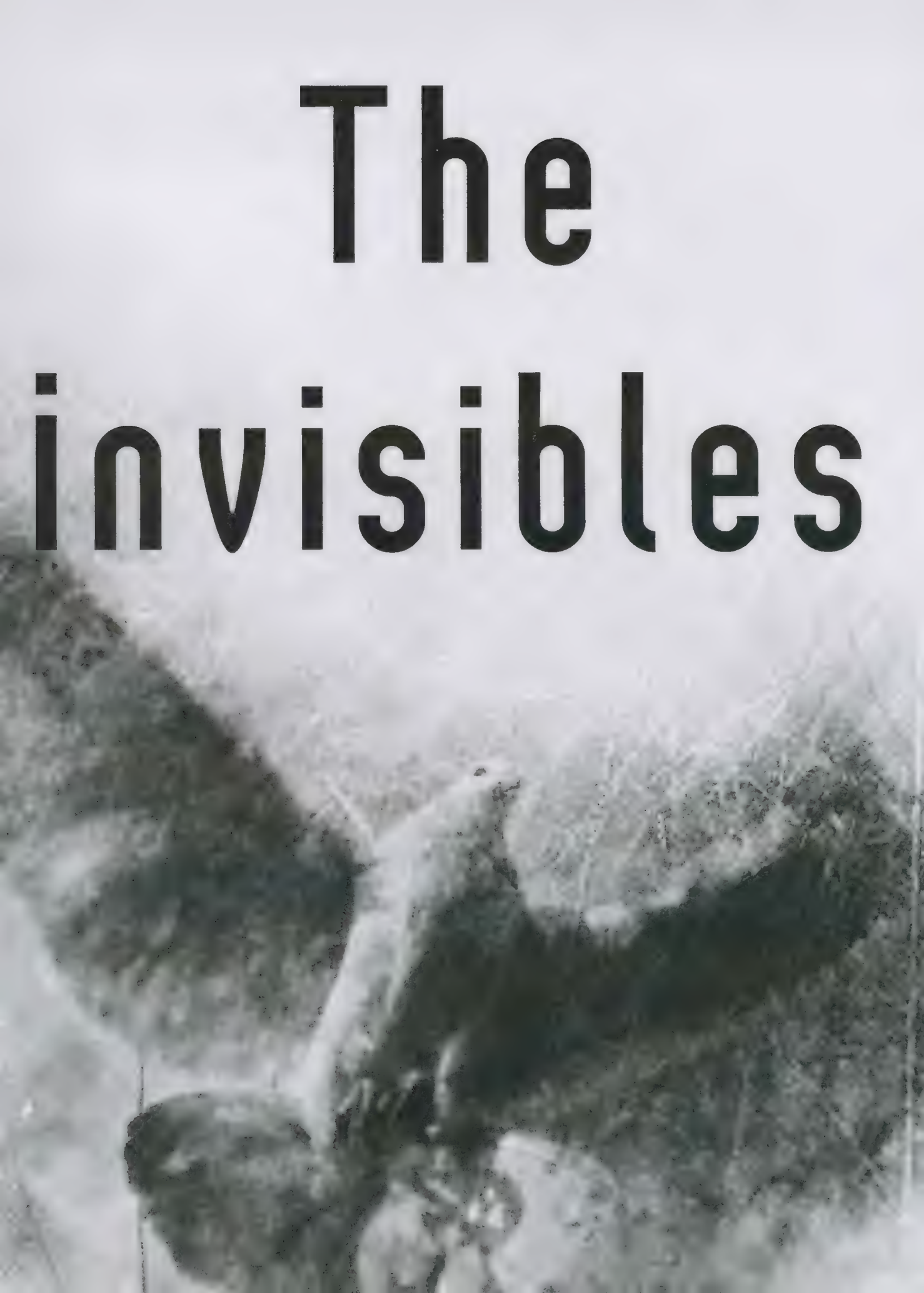
"Hey? Are you over there?"

I thought I heard Dobie's chair creak like he was getting up, so I turned the gun away from the caravan.

"I'm okay, Dobie. It's just hard to look at empty desert after so much excitement."

That was enough, and Dobie stayed put. Unless someone came in or Marketing squealed, I had until the end of my shift to sort this out. I was screwed all right, but I still wasn't sure why I was so damned happy. ✪

The invisibles



Élisabeth Vonarburg

Translated by Howard Scott & Élisabeth Vonarburg

APPOINTMENT CONFIRMED, TRIP LOGGED, DOCTOR LÉVEC, 9:30AM. You watch the last letters fade from the screen, then you lift your hand from the pad. When you were little, you thought it must tickle when chips are reconfigured. But it doesn't. The intangible instructions pass through skin and flesh to be recorded in one of the five integrated circuits grafted on the distal phalanges, and you never feel anything. Your mother always rubbed her hand anyway. You rub yours too, a melancholy whim, in memory of her.

You are shaken by a coughing fit as you walk back into the tiny kitchen. It should seem bigger; this whole one bedroom apartment should, now that you are living alone here. But no, it just seems, like you, unbalanced, out of kilter, vacant.

After you have sat down and poured the tea, you add a spoonful of honey and stir the steaming liquid. You miss Doriale, the mirror of her gestures, her wrinkles, her gaze, her smile, the "poor little Baldy" with which she would have soothed your latest coughing fit. She loved your first name, Tybald, the subject between you of playful ribbing, even after all this time. Her name wasn't as good for puns, but during the time of her triumphant blondeness, you called her "my golden one." You still called her that even after she had gone grey, then white – she didn't want to dye her hair. *Ma dorée, madore.*

You swallow one last mouthful of syrupy tea, with difficulty. Doesn't matter whether it's tears or a cold tightening your throat. A glance at the clock: almost half past seven. Come on, you have to get ready. Mustn't be late for that appointment: for almost a month you've been waiting to see a doctor. You zip up your jacket, you put on your overmantle, and before slipping on your sanitary mask, you glance quickly in the small mirror by the door, an illusion of company. Surprised as always to see yourself so old, you try to hear Doriale's voice: "We're not getting any younger, my poor little Tybald." You think suddenly that you don't have the face for your name. Doriale, Tybald…those were once fashionable names, the choice of younger generations. With all those wrinkles and that white hair, you should be called Thibaud, like your paternal great-grandfather, or Auntie Madona – who was actually your great-uncle.

This incongruous thought makes you smile, a smile that fades gradually as you open your door and head towards the squeaky elevator. Even under the domes, names change, times change; you still grow old even though old age lasts longer now. And you still get colds.

You step out of your big tower just in time to see the bubblebus pull away in the distance. No matter, one comes every fifteen minutes. And you have plenty of time to get to the Health District. When you get to the boarding zone, you sit down on one of the benches, alone for a few moments before the arrival of the next batch of workers, their long, overmantled silhouettes already visible on the sidewalks. Absentmindedly, you tilt back your head to contemplate the milky curve of the sky – well, of the dome that covers the District. You don't see much of it, actually, the massive buildings hide most of it, these big, dark fingers. It's raining, perhaps, outside. Or maybe even snowing. It's winter, after all, outside. You've never seen real snow. There is snow, artificial snow that never melts, in Complex Mont-Régal where you used to go with Doriale and the children, in the Gusto District. And the snow in the TriDees, a dusting of electrons for virtual sports – less dangerous, when you're getting on in years. Hardly more real, the snow in documentaries about nature being reborn outside the domed cities. Your great-great and a few times greater-grandfather, yes, he had known winter. He was from that generation, the Pioneers, as they say now in the docudramas – but he called them "the *Catastrophees*," in the vid, because they had no choice, what with the floods, and the droughts, and the grasshoppers, and the diseases, everything you learned about in school. That generation, the first to grow up under the domes, the last to be born outside. You didn't know him, of course, this ancestor of yours, but you've always been fascinated by that story, so faithfully watched at Christmas, one generation after the other, you can almost recall a winter storm: the vast whiteness, almost a silence, the brief respite from the constant rumble of the old sprawling city.

You look around with a little sigh. Silence, nowadays, is the rule: the big bubblebuses move with a muffled hum on their big wheels. Scarcely any birds are singing, although they seem happy, and you wonder sometimes if the day will come when, in spite of all the efforts, in spite of everyone's sacrifices, the birds will be nothing more than simulations. The trees, too, perhaps. A few years ago, they removed all the elms from the street, victims of some disease, and replaced them with mountain ash. Very small, don't grow fast, even though the domes let light from the sun through, while theoretically neutralizing the radiations that are dangerous to humans. But they're pretty, those trees, with their red berries, the contrast with the green, patches of colour against the dull grey, in winter.

A coloured twinkling, peripheral to your vision, draws your gaze towards the massive base of your apartment building across the street. You hadn't noticed it coming out, near the main entrance, that blue patch, a small round fountain with gushing waters – it was the movement that attracted your attention.

You squint. It's not a real fountain, of course. They wouldn't waste water that way. A mural, instead, a skilful trompe-l'œil painting: the mosaics of the basin, fish-bodied women, and what you recognize, after searching for the name, as dolphins; rather surprising that extinct animals are used this way as decoration, almost shocking. But the water gushes in a convincing way, one of those new photodynamic materials. Must be one of those figurative decals, all blue in one hue or another, that appear and disappear in the street lately, removed at night by municipal employees – someone must have decided to experiment with urban decoration. Like that kind of weird sculpture, the other day, in the Business District, right in the middle of the Central Promenade – but there it was much more rudimentary: a pile of chunks of concrete and bricks vaguely recalling a human silhouette, with that long slab set askew on what would have been a torso, and a big round stone, a real stone, for the head, topped with a garland of flowers, real ones, daisies. Weird, but not very beautiful; actually, rather shocking too, but for the opposite reason: natural flowers, what a waste! Furthermore, that could-be sculpture disappeared the next day.

The bubblebus stops with a wheezy whistle. As you board, you place your hand on the pad, which records your destination. You don't even bother to look around for a place to sit. Rush hour. No matter, in about half an hour, once most of this crowd gets off at Metro 24, you will be able to sit down and take your pocketbook out of your overmantle.

You barely look up when the disembodied voice announces the first stop. This is still the Housing District. A little bell rings when the bubblebus moves off: it has reached its maximum and will not take on any more passengers; good, at this time of day, no more stops, the next will be the Metro. You grab hold of the nearest seat handle, trying to cough discreetly, eyes absentmindedly staring at the side screens of the windows, filled with news and advertising.

After the bubblebus stops at the heavy grey cube of the Metro building, there are only about twenty passengers left in all, counting the half-dozen people who come in. That doesn't surprise you: they must be going to the Commercial District or the Hospital District, which is the terminus. You've taken a seat anyhow and got your book out of your pocket. The trip to the Hospital District won't take more than an hour. That doesn't bother you, quite the contrary: you'll have time to read. You find your page and you dive back into the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, without worrying about the slightly supercilious looks of your neighbours – those at least who are not hypnotized by screens, either window displays or their televids. Yes, you like to read paper books, you're old-fashioned, okay? Soon, you forget the booming promises of the ads, the infallibly velvety voices of the announcers. It's not Conan Doyle's Sherlock, of course – a new author has recently taken over the franchise – but you find these investigations fascinating. Such a strange world, that nineteenth century. It could just as well be another planet.

The bubblebus has been stopped for a while when you look up and realize that you're the last passenger. You didn't hear the announcement for the terminus. And did you read so fast? You've finished your novel. You hastily toss the book into the recycling hole, regretting as usual not to be able to keep it, and you step down onto the sidewalk. You hear the door of the bubblebus close again with a hiss. The vehicle rapidly moves away.

You, on the sidewalk, have not budged. Hands clenched in the pockets of your overmantle, you look around, a whistling in your ears, without seeing anything clearly, overcome by a disturbing, nauseous feeling, like missing a step in a dream: not the right shapes, not the right colours, not the right smells. This is not the Hospital District. And, almost immediately, incredulity on the verge of panic: you don't know this place. You have never been here.

And that's impossible.

Five fingers, five chips, five Districts. "Hous-ing, Work and Bus-i-ness, Ed-uc-ation-and-Health, Muuu-ni-cipal and…Gustooo!" The rhythmic litany of kindergarten, the refrains of hopscotch or skipping rope, plays over and over and over in your head. And the lessons, later, in school: always touching the pads, sometimes hand-shaped, at home, in the buses, in the Metro stations outside the doors and the barriers in the corridors, at the start of moving sidewalks, at the foot of escalators, in elevators, the very big, the medium, the small, everything that distributes the population of the city to the left, to the right, upwards or downwards: everyone goes where they need to go. That's normal, because otherwise there would be chaos in the city, the city from which the gasoline monsters that were destroying the world have disappeared: exasperated hordes caught in jams, slow-downs, gridlock, inefficiency, disorder, the erosion of civic pride… Repeating the terrible mistakes of past generations is out of the question. "That's the price we have to pay," said Auntie Madona – she had explained to you what 'money' was, but you found that strange, since there wasn't any anymore: you put your hand on a pad, that's all; later, of course, you understood that you still paid. That you always pay. You just don't realize it right away.

Thinking of Auntie Madona, with her pink hair, her fluorescent tattoos, her little rings and her magnetic beads everywhere, does not, however, allay your panic. You turn around, but the bubblebus is already gone. A whiny little voice repeats in your head: where-where-where? Where are you, if you're not where you need to go? You look around again, your heart pounding, reeling with vertigo, and sudden fear: come on, you're not going to faint, are you?

Then a jolt of irritated embarrassment propels you to a bench. There are benches, at least, around this boarding zone. And fortunately, although bizarrely, there is no one there to notice your distress, except perhaps that young man who watches his televid, sitting at the other end of this long bench. You slump onto the seat, your hands crossed on your knees, your eyes staring at your hands, forcing yourself to breathe deeply, as you were taught in meditation class. After a moment, the rhythm has its effect. The bench stops being only a function to again become an object.

A wooden object. Made of real wood.

Your astonishment is tinged a different shade now. There are no Districts where the benches are made of wood. Concrete, bricks, recycled materials of various densities moulded into geometrical shapes, but natural wood, never.

This bench even has a pleasantly curved back. And comfortable arms. As a result, a spark of incredulous curiosity makes you look up and survey your surroundings again. A pretty, open square paved in pink and grey stone, trees…elms! And birds flitting in the branches, singing. All around the square, small, smart buildings with greenery dripping from their roofs.

A sudden, preposterous thought crosses your mind: what would Holmes do in this situation?

I don't think I'll go and talk with you right away.

.....

You look up at the bathroom mirror, and your hand stops, the mascara brush at the tip of your lashes. Drops down again, in slow motion. You remained for an instant, your eyes in the eyes of your reflection, in the same sluggish stupor as every morning, every evening, those moments when you can't avoid looking at yourself, when you can't stop yourself from thinking *it's over, Gisèle, nobody's going to look at you ever again*. It's absurd, of course, repellent even,

this reflex of self-pity. You're thirty years old, your life is not over, there will be other loves, other gazes, everybody tells you that starting with your therapist, you even say so yourself. It's a phase, you have to wait, everything passes, it will pass.

It will pass.

To escape from the mirror, you look down at the shelves of the sink: jars, bottles, perfumes, small jewellery box, toothbrush… Your things, which occupy all the space now. But they took up almost all the space anyway, even before. He took away his toiletries bag, and now there is nothing left of him. Like everywhere in the house, the bedroom, the living room… Even the disappearance of his clothes from the closets has not really left gaps. How is it possible? How can someone live somewhere more than ten years without leaving a trace? The wallpaper, the furniture, the decor…it's all you, he left it all up to you, acquiescing to all your choices. The house, though you purchased it together, is in your name, you didn't even need to buy back his share. He said: "I like to live light, ready for adventure." That made you laugh, bewildered: what adventure? There are only five possible destinations in the city, and when it comes to outside destinations, leaving on the spur of the moment is not something anybody does. You spent nearly two years planning your honeymoon in the Vancouver tourist zone, and it took you five years to pay it off.

But he found himself an adventure of sorts. Appealing enough to become his new life. Oh, you'd suspected, for several months, that something was not right – the lateness, the silences, the distraction, that distance that was widening between you two. Until your return, that day, to the silent house, and the message blinking on the smart-house screen, written, not even any vid. That, of course, is what hurts the most: that he didn't have the courage to say it to your face, not even through a screen, that he has avoided all contact since, leaving everything in the hands of legal services. He could do that, your marriage contract permitted it, but twelve years of life together, twelve years, and then this evasion, this flight, this cowardice?

On the other hand, it will make the anger easier. The contempt too, later, when you get to that point. You know it.

That gives you no relief. You feel the tears welling up in your eyes, again. Contempt might be useful for cutting the last painful ties, but it's an unhealthy feeling. It diminishes those who feel it. You anticipate it without joy.

Enough! You carefully finish your make-up, with a hand that doesn't tremble, you go into the kitchen – then slow your pace again, in the familiar smell of brewed coffee on the console: you're not hungry, the very idea of eating a solitary breakfast makes you nauseous. A coffee, okay, that at least. You got up much too early, after a nightmare about running and drowning, the meaning of which you really don't have to wonder about. A glance at the clock confirms your suspicion: it's barely seven! You only need thirty minutes to get to the college, and the work day only begins at ten o'clock in the School District.

But you will not stay a second longer in this vacant, muddled house. You'll walk, that's what you'll do. You'll go by foot to Ourlemont Metro instead of taking a taxibub. It's good for you, your therapist would say.

You put on your overmantle, careful not to meet yourself in the big mirror beside the hall door, and you let the house lock up behind you.

You stroll briskly past the taxibub station – they are all there, no one leaves this early for work. The empty street looks different in the more diffuse light – the dome isn't completely turned off yet. It's that tentative moment when the first light of day merges with the night-time lighting, especially in winter. The genelms, still fully in leaf, arch majestically over the sidewalks, in a musical aura of chirping that almost makes you smile. You've always loved those trees. They grew up with you. You remember when they were planted everywhere in Ourlemont. You were what, five, six years old? In spite of protests from the Authentists, because it was a genetically modified species – and from a few residents, because of the cost. But it was worth it: they will live at least as long as you, without ever getting sick. And all those birdsongs! A brief regret: usually, you feed crumbs to those birds, but today, you just skipped breakfast.

For him, your runaway spouse, the birds were just a racket; and he was more likely to talk about the oxygen/carbon dioxide ratio per tree. Damn engineer!

Gloomy, and irritated, you quicken your pace, then you force yourself to slow down. No point in getting to the Metro too fast, is there? Instead you examine as you pass the pretty houses and the smart condominiums that line the street, with their little patches of garden, the contours that highlight here and there the clever set-backs in the façades, the scrolling of the balconies and outside staircases, the window frames. From time to time, a taller housing complex, ten or so stories, shimmering with plasglass, with the greenery that cascades from floor to floor from the top.

You check your watch: barely a quarter past seven. And you're not very far from the station now. You're going to arrive at the college very early, that's for sure! But why not? You will be able to have breakfast in the cafeteria when it opens. Maybe you'll be hungry by then. And then tackle the backlog of virtual paperwork, a welcome distraction in fact – and necessary, since you've gotten way behind, with all these stupid bouts of melancholy. You're almost in a good mood when you get to the Metro. The clean, transparent architecture of the building always gives you a feeling of lightness, as does the rippling play of the colours, varying with the seasons, in the big stained glass windows. Inside the huge central concourse, a few people come and go without haste or hurry, since it's not rush hour, far from it. When you were little, you saw this as an orderly ballet, all those big silhouettes with their differences softened by their overmantles, which varied only in colour. The ballet of adults, who must be wise and strong, and know everything. And now you're an adult. Not very wise. Nor very strong: two lovers are kissing in front of you, and it's like being punched in the chest. You turn into the tunnel on your right, hit the pad at the entrance to the sidewalks, like slapping someone. The barrier moves aside, and you step onto the slow moving lane. A seat is empty, and you drop into it, furious with yourself. Carefully indifferent to the passengers being carried just beside you on the fast lane, you rummage in your briefcase and pull out your organizer, brusquely unfold the shiny page. You tap your fingernail on the *Books* icon, select a title at random, then press the *Music* icon, choose *Jazz Vocal Women 20th* and, after you put the wifis in your ears, you start reading. The same paragraph, over and over, it takes you a moment to realize it. Some love story. So you switch the book off, you close your eyes, and you listen to the melancholy voice of Billie Holiday, a woman who has been dead for a long time and who could just as well have lived in another universe: *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

When the buzzer sounds to announce the end of the sidewalk, you stand up, jamming the organizer in your pocket, without bothering to refold it. With a little tap on one ear, you increase the volume of the wifis. It is pleasant this way, to be a consciousness floating now in the ghost of Billie Holliday, *Love Me or Leave Me*, your feet stop, start up again, turn to the left, to the right, your body advances, goes up and down a whole series of corridors and escalators, barriers open

and close when your hand absently brushes the pads as you pass, *Solitude*, even though there are really a lot of people on the platform when you get there, the train was already there, and you let yourself be carried forward by the movement of the crowd, eyes half-closed, refusing to be surprised by the throng, which almost exempts you from holding on in the wagon, *Don't Worry About Me*.

And yet, after a moment, an unpleasant feeling comes and almost pricks your trance. Through that small puncture the surrounding world tries to penetrate your consciousness – this Metro train is really bumpy, the smell of vanilla coming from the ceiling slats really obtrusive – but you stubbornly push it away by turning up the volume of the wifis and by humming to yourself to get back into the music, *I'm Through With Love*.

You didn't count the stops but the programmed tickling in your index finger warns you : here's yours. You give a little sigh then let yourself again be carried along by the crowd of overmantles that are pouring onto the platform.

You stop.

You would like to stop, but you are jostled by passing passengers, and you are forced to follow the movement, while trying to look around you, stunned. On the curved walls of the station constant images are flashing, while a background of music reverberates at cardiac tempo with thundering advertising joviality. Smells assail you, a vague stench of mildew, rubber and hot asphalt, and a current of heavy, damp air propelled by the departing train: a string of cars, boxes painted beige and orangey red instead of the elegant articulated serpent you thought you had boarded. Your head ringing, you let yourself be swept along again by the movement of the crowd, like letting yourself drown. There is a stairway that people are tramping up. And a long, long curving tunnel. No moving sidewalks. But still, on the walls, the constant torrent of images, the flashing of too-white smiles in the too-pretty faces two metres high, the gleaming objects, bigger than nature, and the music, exhausting, which the sound from the wifis in your ears does not cover up. An almost reassuring flash in your confusion, which you try to grab hold of: you're dreaming. Such a place does not exist. You're still in your bed and you're dreaming. A dream of staggering precision and absolute absurdity.

But you are still being jostled; you painfully bang your elbow against one of the walls; can a dream be so…real? Your head empty again, a vice around your chest, you remain in movement, because everyone is advancing around you. Another stairway, an escalator this time, a long, slow clanking incline between two ceramic walls of a greenish white colour. The light is different towards the top of the escalator, with a slight draft of cooler air. You are nothing now but astonishment, incredulity, incomprehension, panic, and a frantic desire to get out, get out! If you could, you would climb the steps of the escalator, but there are too many overmantles on each step, and no one is moving.

The central concourse at the top of the escalator is a big rectangular box with a floor of scratched pink tiles, spotted with irregular, dark stains, like rubbery spit. No coloured glass windows, just grey walls. Outside, on the other side of the doors with their dusty windows, which don't slide but have to be pushed, and pushed hard, because they seem extremely heavy, the overmantles are lined up to board enormous wheeled vehicles that pretend to be aerodynamic, but seem to be straight out of the history books. Or out of the urban legends gleefully peddled by the students, at the College: sometimes one appears in a zone, empty, and then disappears. More evidence that you're dreaming? Not a single taxibub in sight. And everything is grey, the enormous outlines of the buildings, like fat fingers across the dome, the sidewalks, the faces of the people.

You came out while one of the massive doors was still wide open, and you took a few steps towards the last vehicle still there, but your body has reached the end of its reflex actions. You stop, arms dangling. The vehicle starts up, a muffled hum actually. No, this is not one of those pollution-belching monsters of yesteryear, in spite of the wheels. This must be public transportation, the equivalent of a taxibub, for sixty rather than ten persons.

Strangely, this reminder of your world hits you even harder, by its very familiarity. You slump onto a bench, a crude, angular affair, no back, no arms, a horizontal surface of grey concrete supported by metal legs. You look around in horror, you are ashen, your hands tremble on the handle of your briefcase. You stare at them, hoping that the young man sitting at the other end of the bench hasn't noticed your distress.

You stay like this for a long time. Long enough for another flood of overmantles to come out through the doors of the station and file onto one of the big vehicles. Long enough for the silence to return, barely broken by a few birdsongs that just sound too cheery, too… birdsongy. You just cannot maintain the hope that this is a dream or even a psychotic episode. You have no more talent for denials than for contempt. Your mind, suddenly independent of your emotions, enumerates a series of irrefutable observations. This is real. This is really happening to you. You were going from your Elm Street to your Montaigne College and you ended up in a place you do not know. Not in the Educational zone, and not in the Hospital zone. This is not the Administrative zone, not the Commercial zone, and not the Amusement zone. It's impossible, but it happened. And yet you took the same route as you did hundreds of other mornings, through the same tunnel, the same moving sidewalks, the same escalators… Or you thought you did? You weren't paying attention.

But you don't *need* to pay attention! The chips know, the touch-pads know. Five chips, five destinations. There are no others. You can't make a mistake and end up…

Somewhere else.

Somewhere else exists, of course. Other cities. With their own zones: residential, administrative, work and consumption, entertainment, education and health. Absolutely identical in their organization to those you know – except in the tourist zones, or else why would anyone go to them? Those long journeys are costly.

And time-consuming. But your trip did not seem to take any longer than your usual route. Seven stations, right? You didn't count… But you cannot be in another city.

You are no longer poised on this uncomfortable bench as if you were on the verge of fleeing. You are *sitting*, now. Your shoulders relax, as do your hands on the handle of your briefcase, your breathing is deeper – even though that makes you aware once again of the strange smells floating in the air. The gaze with which you take in the surroundings gradually becomes more observant than horrified. Huge boxy buildings, scrawny little trees trapped here and there in the sidewalks… All very ugly. How could they have allowed such ugly buildings to be built? And to be willing to work in them! For this must be a work zone, at this time of day. There must be hundreds, perhaps thousands of people in some of those buildings.

But that's against all city regulations!

In the city you know. The five zones that the five fingers of your left hand give you access to. For the first time, you realize that you have never seen a *map* of the city. Maps of the zones and neighbourhoods within the zones, yes, of course. But in your inner landscape, the half bubbles of these domes are scattered in the middle of an indeterminate space lacking even the markers for north and south and the


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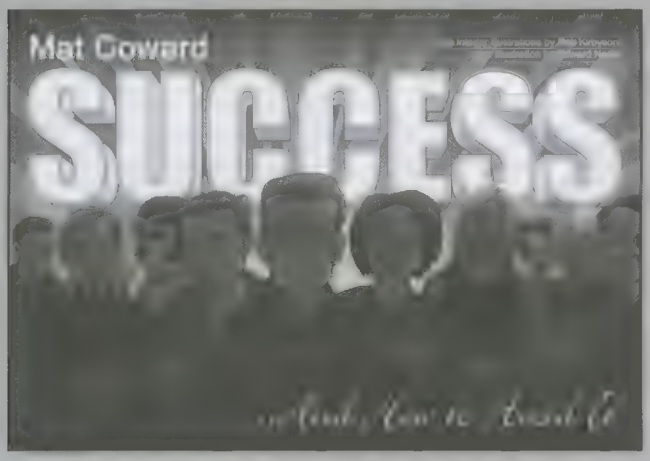
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rest. A space imagined on the basis of educational documentaries – 'the country', quasi-generic nature, at best pathetic in its fragility, at worst frightening because of the unknown dangers it conceals. An abstract place, the main connotation of which is moral, the credo learned since childhood: from that ancient paradise turned infernal, humanity, in the end reasonably virtuous, withdrew so it could be reborn after devastation and ancient catastrophes.

At last, you think of checking your watch. Almost ten o'clock?

The trip did last much longer than usual.

And what if…?

Could it be…could it be…could it be…?

I will still wait a little while longer before sitting closer to you on that bench, before entering your real story.

.....

For I am imagining all this, while I am glancing stealthily at you. That's my profession, after all. I am a class 1 entertainer. In the past, they said 'artist'. Some people still do, among the Councillors – the class of those who are actually above classes, and who have their own entertainers, just as they have their own districts, zones you know nothing about. But with time, 'entertainer' has come to be preferred. I entertain; I provide amusement, distraction – *diversion*. You all need so much to be *diverted*. Sports, music, dance, sex, something for all tastes, for all classes. I invent stories, usually to be read; sometimes romance novels, sometimes detective stories; sometimes I draw them, or animate them. I even adapted a few as musicals.

It's a pernicious process, inventing stories, as tame as they are. We are encouraged to unhinge reality a little, to move into those cracks, and soon we are amusing ourselves maintaining systems of impeccable logic on the head of a pin, we juggle the possibilities, we start to ask questions… But all that remained theoretical for me, abstract fantasies. Until the moment when I, too, got lost in the City. The moment of discovery. And then I became a secret Diverter.

I did not choose you two at random, no more than I was myself in all likelihood chosen. I don't know what criteria the other Diverters use to choose their subjects but for me, it was because you are floating between two lives. You got lonely and ill, Tybald, you too lost your love, Gisèle; you have both been unmoored by circumstances. Oh, yes, I know about you everything that is known by the urb's memories, including the data you believe to be confidential: medical file, psychological examinations, and everything you have ever typed on a keyboard: private confessions, letters of love or of break-up. But the past is no guarantee of the future, and nothing can predict your reaction. I can only imagine it, hope for it. I chose where you come from, and where you are going – to zones other than yours. And once you are there, I go to meet you, as someone came to meet me. But I wait for the right moment: I have learned to read bodies, looks, actions. No one came to find me until the end of the day. I may not wait as long for you. But I was class 1, an entertainer who, by profession, had access to a lot of disparate data and who, by inclination, loved to fill the ellipses: I understood quickly. All those trips from a zone to another, that sometimes take such a long time by bus and in the subway… There must even be some ruins left here and there, of the neighbourhoods that were not included when the domes were going up. No, it's not nature that fills the empty spaces between the domes, but other domes, other zones intermingled in space if not in your awareness. Nature is somewhere else, not even in the farming cities where it has been reconstituted under domes, with varying success. But you've been consuming their produce for a long time without much wondering about their provenance – vegetables and meat have always grown on superstores' shelves, haven't they?

The excitement, I have to admit, quickly overcame the astonishment, and even the indignation: the adventure, every time I put my hand on a pad at the start of a trip, that day… No fear, or fear quickly dissipated – the natural arrogance of class 1s, you're born with it, you have the right to exist, the world is your oyster…since you don't know about the Councillors, and the others. All the others.

"The world!"

I started journeying in this new world that had been given to me, the domes of the city. All the domes of the city. The Diverters had first sent me into a Zone 3, of course. A strange gift, all that ugliness piled up on itself. But a gift nevertheless for under all those overmantles I found people just like you, Gisèle, and you, Tybald. So many conversations, that day, under so many improvised disguises – you must be an actor when you invent stories, a chameleon. I lied all day long and yet nothing had ever been so true. I was reckless: I worked with many of you; I took your colours, your speech, and your accents when it was necessary. I ate with you, I had fun with you. I even went to a hospital. No alarms were set off anywhere. The Councillors have too much confidence in their machines, and in the seductiveness of power for those to whom they toss a few scraps.

I only began to get worried towards the end of the evening, when everybody would be returning to their residential factories. And then only did someone come and sit down beside me, to tell me how I could return home – which would never again really be my home. ("Will I see you again?" I asked the Diverter. And that smile I was then offered, both sad and tender: "No.")

I will explain to you what we, the Diverters, are – if you ask. And I will tell you the rest: how to hack into the databanks, how to let others lose themselves, find themselves. If you like: for the past is no guarantee of the future, knowledge is no guarantee of action. One of you, Tybald, Gisèle, or perhaps both, will hasten to forget this day like a bad dream; will bury them in the deepest recesses of your minds, those troublesome, impossible, perhaps dangerous memories. It is your space of freedom, your right. Only that temporary displacement will have been imposed on you. For the rest, you will decide yourself.

But perhaps you will be one of those who, to the best of their means, open isolated windows onto the invisible cities. You love puttering around in your leisure time, Tybald. And, Gisèle, when you were little, you liked to draw – perhaps you will decide to rekindle that lost, raw talent. A scale model of a comfortable bench will perhaps appear on your street, Tybald – painted blue, like my virtual fountain, once the colour of the real sky. And, pinned up in the corridors of your college, Gisèle, anonymous views of grey streets punctuated with small green trees with red fruit. As for me, while attending to my secret diversions, I will continue to develop my fictions, my own side-step between compromise and appeasement, always at the limits of what is tolerated by the more or less oblivious censors among the urb's publishers, critics and readers. Perhaps you will even read some of them.

And now I will go and speak with you. For, after all, here and now, this is our story. ✡

Élisabeth Vonarburg was born to life in 1947 (France), and to science fiction in 1964. She teaches French Literature and Creative Writing on and off at various universities in Quebec (since immigration, in 1973) and has been a 'fulltime writer' since 1990. She has published five story collections in French and one in English (*Slow Engines of Time*, Tesseract, 2001), and fifteen novels in French, five of which have been translated into English: *The Silent City*, *In the Mothers' Land* aka *The Maerlande Chronicles*, *Reluctant Voyagers*, *Dreams of the Sea* (*Tyranaël* 1, 2003), *A Game of Perfection* (*Tyranaël* 2, 2005). Élisabeth has received more than thirty awards in France, Canada and the USA.

INTO THE

Ani Menon




NIGHT

The island of Meridian was still thirty minutes away, but Kallikulam Ramaswamy Iyer had already done enough neck stretches, shoulder shrugs, hand wiggles and toe scrunches to limber his joints for this lifetime and the next.

He was tired. He was eighty-two years old and had relaxed his ancient Brahmin joints through many a stressful hour, but the last few days had been some of the worst: first, a thirteen-hour flight from Mumbai to Sydney with a three-day layover at Singapore, then a four-hour flight in a boomerang-shaped aeroplane from Sydney to Fiji's Nadi airport followed by a two-hour ride in a catamaran ferry to Meridian. Far away.

Three days in Singapore's Changi airport! The excuse was that a couple of runways had simply collapsed into the sea, and in the resulting confusion, someone had spirited away six fuel trucks with no consideration for the passengers. So sorry la, no petrol. To add insult to injury, during re-boarding, the agent – a Bangladeshi – had glanced at Ramaswamy's itinerary, shaken his head and said: "An entire village can be relocated with this many travel credits. Enjoy your trip, sir."

As if the move to Meridian had been Ramaswamy's idea! Ramaswamy shook his head. Why had Ganga decided to settle so far away? She'd always been peculiar, his daughter, this bright-eyed girl they had raised from mustard seed through plaits and school bag to first-class first and first menses, this wild daughter of theirs that squeezed their hearts so, squeezed till he'd sworn not to love her anymore, but of course it was all talk, as the missus would verify, for wasn't he here in the belly of a fish, going to a land of cannibals for the sake of their bright-eyed girl who only thirty-seven years ago had begun as a mustard seed as modest as an ant's fart.

"Think in English," advised his wife. "Tamil will only make it harder for you to adjust."

Oh, listen to the Queen of England. Who was the matriculate, madam? And who was the Sixth Standard twice fail?

A wave of laughter surged through the boat. It was beginning to irritate him, these periodic laughs. What were they laughing at? And why was it funny? A passenger in the adjacent seat, a sleek cheetah of an Indian girl who'd been gesturing with her silver thimbles throughout the last half-hour, lifted her head, blinked rapidly and smiled. She looked tired too. What was she doing here, alone, so far away from home and husband?

He continued to brood. She could've stayed. There were plenty of jobs for Hindus in India. Even a job in Europe would've been acceptable. But the South Pacific! Meridian was so new it wasn't even listed in his Rand McNally 1995 *World Almanac*. Who could've foreseen when he left Kallikulam in 1962, barely nineteen years old and with ninety rupees in his pocket, when he'd left his parents, dressed in their starched best, left them behind and forever at the Thrichedur railway station, who could've foreseen this final migration, three score and three years later, to a land without elephants, to a land without ancestors, who could have foreseen?

"Stop beating that drum, sir," said Paru. "Fall on your knees and thank your Krishna-bhagavan that you have such a sterling daughter. You're in her care now. So chin up and get ready for the next innings."

You? What had happened to the 'we'? His wife Paru had been younger by ten years. By all logic she should have been on this boat, not him. But of course, the 'we' of sixty years plus had ended at the Sion Electric Crematorium in Mumbai.

He flexed his neck. No. That had just been the disposal of the end. The end had come with a shopping list. Paru had sent him to buy groceries and when he returned, it was to a world without – No, it was no use dwelling on that day. Today was the first day of the rest of his life.

He sat, resigned, as another rash of laughter broke out. The girl was also laughing. She must've sensed his inspection, because she turned her head in his direction. Her eyes were milked over, like the white, dead corals he'd seen near Fiji. Pity struggled with revulsion in his mind. Oh God, what was the matter with the girl's eyelids? Why was she rolling them up? Almost like a lizard. Poor girl. Ramaswamy quickly turned his head. So there were handicapped people in the West as well. But then, Earth itself was handicapped now, broke and broken.

People may say what they want, thought Ramaswamy, but fate was blind. Why else would this beautiful girl be blind, why else would he have had to leave India, and why else would the last conversation with his wife have been about potatoes, brinjals and coconuts and would he, for God's sake, please, please check the tomatoes before buying them, because the last batch had been overripe and practically rotten. It could've been about anything, and it had been.

He didn't mind that his wife had died. She'd become tired, worn out. Nothing had interested her anymore, not even their fights, and her insults had stopped being insults and begun to feel like the instructions of someone departing for an immensely long journey. She'd become weary, Paru had, his wife of sixty years and seven lives, weary of waiting for Ganga to amass the papers and travel-credits "to bring you home, Amma. I love you, please, please hang in there, okay?" Why had his house been any less of a home? Had he not taken care of his wife? Paru wanted to let go, and he'd gotten tired of holding on for the both of them. He didn't mind. But she hadn't left empty handed. She'd taken his memories with her. That he did mind.

It meant that he now had to recollect things, and could no longer rely on a shout ("Paru!") and an answer. For instance, what was the name of the school he'd attended in the 1940s? Had they first talked in the Esso canteen, or had it been that monsoon day when he'd offered her his umbrella? What was the name of his last American boss at Esso, the year before it became Hindustan Petroleum? He clearly remembered the fellow. Especially his laugh. The fellow would laugh, a great big honk of pure evil, revealing a panoply of white, red, yellow, lead glint and a couple of canines sharpened by decades of insatiable meat-eating. But what was his name?

There was an announcement being made, but the accent was impossible to understand. It was clear though they'd almost arrived. Through the giant windows, he could see bits and pieces of the skyline. Passengers were busy getting their things together; a few were busy blinking at each other. Maybe that's how they said goodbye in this part of the world. The blinking reminded him of ants on a sugar trail. The catamaran docked with a bump and jerk.

"We've arrived," said his co-passenger. "You can unbuckle now."

"I know," said Ramaswamy, smiling and blinking. "That's what I want, that's what you want, but that's not what the buckle wants."

"Here, let me help. It's been a long journey, huh?"

And before he could say anything, she leaned over and began to struggle with the belt. Her hair glistened as if coated with glass. He couldn't help touching a strand, and she glanced at him. "Careful. The alloy coat is not quite stable yet."

"Are you married?" he asked.

She frowned and didn't answer. "There!" She detached the belt. "Come, Appa. I'll call Aaliyah and let her know we've arrived."

Appa? Yes, of course. This was Ganga, his daughter. How could he not have recognized her? The hair was a factor, yes. But still.

What was happening to him? He was so astonished by the lapse in memory, he forgot to be terrified.

"I'm okay," he said, furious with Paru. It was all her fault. Fresh resentment began to ooze from the wound of his recent loss.

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He'd been here before, a stranger in a strange land. In 1962, he'd stepped out on Platform No.3 at the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, with the smell of soot in his nostrils, a roll of bedding and an aluminium trunk full of good advice. He'd survived the first strange day, and the second, and the third, till a season had passed, and he'd become part of the very strangeness he'd seen on the first day. On his way to work, he'd sometimes see himself stepping out of a train, on this platform, on that platform, from this village, from that village, going everywhere and going nowhere at all.

So why did this transition feel so different, as if he were doing it for the very first time? Perhaps strangeness simply could not be gotten used to. Especially if the strangeness lay, not in the miracles of the place, but in its small-small things.

The miracles were manageable, because they all had a familiar feel. Buildings that supposedly chatted to each other about energy, politics and life. Or, for example, the 'bubbles'. They were cars with skins that quivered and became teardrop-shaped as they picked up speed. His daughter had tried to explain how it all worked: drive-by-wire, gyroscopic gaddabaddoo, Gandhi's loincloth, and pure unadulterated ghee… Who knew how it worked? He could tell she had no idea either. But they were just inventions.

Ditto for the hearsee. It was just a binoculars and headset rolled into one. With the hearsee, you could see what other people were seeing, hear what other people were hearing, assuming they had hearsees too. It used a 'nictating membrane' and was of course wireless. Wireless was a must. He'd had the idea himself one afternoon, so he wasn't too surprised.

No, the strangeness lay in other things, once familiar things. It lay in Ganga. She had so many friends. He'd always hated that word: friend. It excused everything and expected nothing.

One friend – Aaliyah – seemed to be a permanent guest. Another 'friend' was practically an animal: she lay curled on the sofa, her skinny, thimbled hands working ceaselessly – thinking about the mathematics of relatives in general, Ganga claimed – getting up only to feed, eating things directly from the fridge, all the while standing on one leg like a flamingo and eyeing him cautiously, as if she half-expected an ambush. They were many others, all women, with made-up names, Tomi, Rex, Lace, Sharon, and once, just once, a slender man with a sharp Aryan nose, high forehead, and a girl's name. Ramaswamy had asked him why.

"Because I am a girl," he'd replied.

Dinner was a nightmare: meat and wine all around him, overcooked rice, undercooked vegetables (they crunched!), rubbery yogurt, and cold metal spoons. The first time he ate with his hand – thoroughly mixing the rice and buttermilk by hand, relishing every wet squelch, and licking the fingers at the end – it'd been impossible to ignore the long watchful silences, rapid blinks, the Flamingo's high laugh, and most hurtful of all, Ganga's startled expression. As if she didn't know. As if she too hadn't eaten the Tamil Brahmin way, his way, the correct way, once. As if she'd forgotten.

He had a room at the end of the hall on the first floor, tucked away from the rest of the house. The girls mostly lived upstairs, rarely coming down, and if they did talk to him, it was only to ask him idiotic questions about festivals, the caste system and Hinduism. He had to watch his answers. Otherwise:

"That's rubbish," Ganga would begin, knitting her brows. "If you look at the facts…"

The facts were these: Brahmanism was bad. The West was good. Everything he said was superstition. Everything she said was science. Those were the facts. S'all right. He had his beliefs, she had hers. She called her beliefs 'facts', and that was all right too. If science was all-powerful, then why she did grovel before the Evolution God? Evolution this, Evolution that. The girl knew a lot, but she understood nothing. As people said, just being able to talk about a trunk didn't make you an elephant.

But most of all, it was the silence that was intolerable. So many circuits of the house, so many cautious in-the-doorway peeks into bedrooms, so many against-the-light inspections of their mail, so many cups of microwave chai, so many naps and then to painfully go up, down, around and about the house circumnavigating the hours, the day, the month. Occasionally the house would pass on messages in Ganga's voice or Aaliyah's voice, and he'd feel like a house pet, expected to mewl and bark at the sound of his master's voice. He never responded when they called, shuffling around silently, refusing to be happy for their sake, and fully aware that irrespective of whether he responded or not, every room in the house was visible to their lizard eyes.

The silence of his Mumbai apartment had always been bordered with far-away horns, shouts of neighbourhood children, Paru's telephone gossip and the imminent possibility of tea. This silence had weight. Sometimes he cried.

.....

Ramaswamy lay in bed, facing the wall, the coverlet pulled all the way to his neck, and quietly burbling in a mix of English and Tamil.

"Appa?"

He froze.

"Who are you talking to? Are you alright? Are your legs hurting?"

When he turned, he saw Ganga in her nightdress, her face lit from below by the room's night light.

"I'm okay. Just thinking, that's all. About the good old days."

She sat down beside him and put a hand on his chest. "Not able to sleep?"

"How much sleep can I do?" He hesitated, and then spoke in a rush. "Ganga, I want to go back to Mumbai. I can't live here in this freezing cold and twenty-four hours of rain. Everything is backwards and upside down. From the nose via the back of head to the ear, as people say. A simple man like myself only needs his two servings of rice-curds and a glass of water. That I can get for myself. Why should I be a burden to you? I am going back."

"We can't have this conversation over and over again. Haven't you been watching the news from India? And there's no one there to take care of you. In a few years, your health problems are only going to get worse. If anything happens – "

"Krishna-bhagavan will take care of me as he has all these years."

"Don't be childish! Amma took care of you all these years, not your bloody bhagavan. So at least give credit where it's due."

He was pleased to see her voice rise and her accent veer into its natural roly-poly South-Indian roundness. Ha! Not such a suit-and-boot madam after all. He remembered roly-poly; he'd walked this little girl back from kindergarten every day, pig-tails and upturned face, hopeful smile and Appa, Appa, please can I have some kulfi, Appa.

Where had it all gone wrong with Ganga? Was it the day he'd found her smoking with the sweeper's boy, a shudran, whose polluting dirty hand also happened to be inside her unzipped pants? Or was

it when she'd burnt her Maths degree merely because her college had changed its name from the Indian Institute of Science to the Hindu Institute of Science? Or was it that black day when she'd left India, a month after renouncing her citizenship – he hadn't know it was possible – and in her fierce embrace, he'd sensed an irreversible letting go.

I should've disciplined her more, thought Ramaswamy, *but as people say, a donkey never has a tiger for a father.*

"Can we go to a doctor?" he asked.

"Now?"

She nictated and geometric patterns flashed across her eyelids; the room seemed filled with a new awareness. He sensed there were others in the room, watching, listening, perhaps even commenting on him.

"Appa? Are you in pain? I can call an ambulance – "

"No, no. I just wanted to get an estimate of how much time I have left."

"No one can tell you that!"

"Not even biology?"

She smiled and touched his face. "Not even biology."

What was the use of it then? He lay back on the bed and turned to face the wall.

"Appa? Look at me." She shook him. "Look at me." And when he did, she continued in the same calm voice. "I know it's all very strange and new to you. And Amma is not here to make it easier. But life is change, and we have to adapt. Otherwise, we might as well be fossils. Evolution – "

"What is this evolution-evolution you keep brandishing like a stick?"

"It's a theory that says we don't need a story to explain how we all got here. It was first clearly explained by Darwin – "

"Speak in Tamil, Ganga. Speak in Tamil."

He listened to her fantastic tale about fish that had grown lungs and learned to walk on earth, a Xerox machine called DNA in every atom and what not. As she talked, her alloy-treated hair furled outwards, a controlled motion that had nothing to do with the wind or any natural shake of the head. Somebody was playing with her hair. He closed his eyes.

When she said 'cells', he imagined tiny telephones, but when she said 'chromosome', 'molecule', 'recombination', and 'species', nothing came to mind at all. He marvelled that she could swallow so incredible a story but refuse to accept the simplest, most obvious explanation understandable by the stupidest child: God did it. But he didn't want her to stop talking.

"Ganga, this Evolution God, is it Christian or some other religion only? And if it is Christian, then who is Jesus?"

She was silent for a few long seconds, and when she spoke, it was quiet enough to be almost a sigh. "Aaliyah is right, Appa. If you're to see, you must have the right eyes first. The first step is to set you up with a visor. It won't be as good as having a hearsee, but it's better than nothing. It'll be easier to see how it all fits together. Maybe a tour of Galapagos, my research lab, fossil museums… Let's see."

.....

He was here, on the battered bench of a battered park, banished for the day, because the house was being energy-audited, and they didn't want him blurting something to the inspector.

It was good to be out, even though the sky was a sickly bluish-grey and the wind was one tooth too sharp. The park was bordered by book shops, clothing stores, cafés and open-air restaurants. He'd picked a spot on a deserted side of the park, because the smell of burning meat reminded him of the ghats of Benares.

Ramaswamy carefully removed the visor and the thimbles from their case. As he stared at the 'vision field', it began to shear, as if it was being stretched from opposite corners. The eye had to keep moving, otherwise the visor would lose focus. His arthritic fingers found it hard to gesture the thimbles to manipulate the visor's controls, and after a while he began to get confused with the coloured flags, training wheels and little rotating astrology-type signs. The view filled with tiny windows and he blinked helplessly as he tried to regain the original view.

"Don't worry," said Paru. "Spectacles are no match for a Senior Clerk from Esso."

Abruptly, a gut-wrenching image of water, wood, blue and sky filled his vision field. And tentacles. He caught a glimpse of lettering: MARINE RESEARCH INSTITUTE. He jerked back in his seat, reaching out to clutch something tangible.

"Hey! No linking," said a voice. "This is a research channel."

And then his view shifted back to the park and its threadbare green. He regained his breath, and with it, triumph. He'd just used somebody else's visor, or more likely, hearsee. So this is what 'surfing' the I-net was all about.

It took a while to retrace his steps, but he managed to get the screen full of windows again, and as it scrolled past, he blinked. And blinked. And blinked. In most cases, he got wobbly images of edges, shadows and corners of rooms. But even when he got a nice view, such as the one from the tourist staring up at the statues on Easter Island, or merely a bizarre one, like that young girl who stared fixedly at different parts of her naked body, what did it matter? Most people seemed to be sitting on equally battered benches staring out over equally battered parks. What did he and they have in common after all, other than a mutual acknowledgment of being lost? He was everywhere and nowhere.

"It is not our time," said Paru, sounding subdued. "Give it a chance."

His visor filled with fifty scattered circles. Ganga had explained that in 'idle mode' the visor would show the GPS coordinates of people in a half-a-mile radius. A window popped up, reminding him to 'fill in his profile'.

"Do what it says," said Paru. "Put up a sign saying you want to chit-chat."

"Keep quiet! You should be sitting here suffering, and I should be in your Madras-coffee loving head. Irresponsible, selfish cow."

He tried to describe himself but didn't get very far. The 'wizard' asked for his Myers-Briggs type, whether he was an introvert or extrovert, whether he was an active or a passive voyeur, and on and on. What kinky things turned Ramaswamy on?

Elephants, thimbled Ramaswamy. Temples. Obedient children. Early morning showers. India. Brahmin culture. Decent women. But then he got diverted with the memories of all the delicious foods he would never eat again.

The bench was still slightly wet, perhaps from the early morning rains. The colony's park in Mumbai had always been chock full of people: retirees, teenage lovers, food vendors, toy vendors, mating dogs, laughing clubs, children running about everywhere. The sky looked dark, swollen, a child about to cry. Perhaps global raining was around the corner.

The visor queried his current mood. He selected the most depressed face he could from the samples in front of him.

I took it all for granted, he thought. His head had begun to ache.

A teenager sat down at the far end of the bench. He had an open, cheerful face framed by a halo of curly black hair. He nodded in Ramaswamy's direction.

"Waz," said the kid. Then he stretched out his legs and made himself comfortable.

The visor claimed the kid's name was Krish and then went on to bug Ramaswamy with a variety of options. Irritated, he took off the visor.

"Excuse me, is your name Krish?"

"Like da tag sez, heya?" The boy seemed a little puzzled, and his eyelids nictated. His expression brightened. "Ya-i-c. Welcome to Oz, uncle."

"I'm Ramaswamy. I'm from India. Tamil Nadu. Are you also from same?"

Krish shrugged. "Maybe. Me's from Wooshnu's navel, maybe."

The boy's accent was not Indian. In fact, Ramaswamy could barely understand what he was saying. "Are you having school holiday today?"

Krish grinned and shook his head. "Waz school? You's the headmaster? What you be teaching, Master Bates?"

Ramaswamy laughed. Kids were scoundrels no matter where they were. "Bad boy. You need to be more disciplined."

"Nuff sport." Krish scooted over. "You's wanting da elephant, heya?"

The boy's eyes were so merry and his smile so infectious, Ramaswamy also found himself smiling. "Heya. Heya. What's this 'heya'?"

"Gimme the izor, dear." The kid reached for the visor, but something about his expression made Ramaswamy snatch it away and put it in his shirt pocket.

Krish shrugged and unbuttoned his pants. "Assayway you's want." He grabbed Ramaswamy's hand and shoved it into his pants. "Go on. Sample all you's want. 100% desi juice on da tap, uncle-dear."

Later, Ramaswamy would puzzle over the fact that the boy's penis had been hard and erect. But it was only one of the many puzzles.

A police car swooped out of nowhere, a blaze of whirling blue lights and piercing siren. The next ten minutes were a terrifying blur. Two officers jumped out of the car; one ran after Krish, and the other fumbled for his handcuff.

His boss from Esso! How was it possible? The same beefy expression, the same greyish-white whiskers, the same sozzled eyes. Mr Gregory! Just remembering the name after all these years was mildly orgasmic.

"Mr Gregory, Sir!" Ramaswamy shot to his feet and was ready for dictation.

"Move again asshole, and you'll make my day." The cop pointed an object that resembled a TV remote at Ramaswamy.

But Ramaswamy had already realized his mistake. Of course this policeman wasn't Mr Gregory. His boss had already been middle-aged when he, Ramaswamy, had joined as a young assistant clerk.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were my boss from Esso. I came here to take some fresh breeze only."

Ramaswamy tried to explain how his hand had ended up in the boy's pants. The boy clearly needed a doctor, he had a rash of some kind. Perhaps he'd thought an Indian would help. But he was only a retired clerk from Esso, his daughter's dependent, practically a beggar himself. Esso's health insurance had barely covered Paru's treatment; there was nothing he could do for random lost-eyed Indian boys. If the officer would be kind enough to call his daughter, Ganga could confirm every detail. When Ramaswamy reached for the visor in his pocket, the officer tasered him.

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In time, the pain faded, as did all direct memory of the incident. In time, a woman in blue came to apologize, and she began to talk about punking clubs, sadistic voyeurs and clockwork porn. He understood little, and was grateful when Aaliyah stepped in to keep it that way.

"Do you remember, Appa," Ganga asked him, a few days after the nightmare, "do you remember a terrace, a girl, and a sweeper's boy?"

Of course he remembered. It was the day his daughter's eyes had begun to terrify him. The boy had been beaten to an inch of his life. Deservedly so. There was no comparison.

"Why do you drag up that incident over and over. Nothing happened."

"Do you know that his hands were just as accidentally placed as yours? That I was the guilty one?"

"I don't know anything… Tell me what to say."

"What's the use then?" She nictated and turned away. "Never mind, Appa."

When the cold rains came, as they often did in this age of carbon, he liked to sit by a corner window of the house and watch the banana tree in the yard make short work of the water. The rain, as thin as cow's milk, rolled off the tree's bright green plates, as ineffective as a mother's Tamil on a child's unrepentant back. Sometimes the Flamingo would creep up and crouch by him, her eyes blind in thought, her bony fingers ceaselessly working on the general problem of relatives.

"What is the solution?" he once asked the Flamingo, in Tamil, "if the ones I love hate what I love?"

The Flamingo said nothing. Perhaps she hadn't heard. It was moot in any case, for the problem was intractable. Change was inevitable; it hadn't been, but now it was. Call it evolution, fate, choice or chance. If that was the only way the world would turn, so be it.

But acceptance wouldn't come. The darkness crowded him from all corners, the light of his understanding curving upwards along its walls and returning in an ever-tighter loop. Soon, he would be beyond the reach of all stories.

"Amma," Ramaswamy would shout, forgetting himself in his despair. His mother: a chequered six-yard sari, a raspy voice, wrinkled hands, jasmine-scented hair and the comfort of her sari's corners. "Amma!"

Sometimes his daughter would turn up with a glass of Horlicks. In her nightdress and short-hair, she resembled one of those Goan ladies in India, brown as a coconut but all white inside. She would pretend to listen to his burbling, her eyes blinking absentmindedly, her hair furling like snakes as they flexed and re-flexed into one of her many styles. She had many styles, but she looked a widow in all of them. She would tell him fantastic tales from science and biology, offering truth when he longed for comfort. He would pick a fight, say outrageous things, insult her friends and all that she held dear, and sometimes Ganga would lose her temper.

"Speak in Tamil," he'd urge. "Speak in Tamil."

Then Ramaswamy would relax. Ah, familiar words. So familiar, so sweetly familiar. He let the ferocious alphabet fall, splish-splosh, all around and galosh, the rain of words, in one ear, out the other, the gentle splash of words, how he missed her, Paru, his comfort, his eyes, how he missed her, his compass, his all, as he walked, ever faster, into the night. ✡

Anil Menon worked for nine years in software worrying about things like secure distributed databases and evolutionary computation. Then he shifted to a different kind of fiction. He has sold stories to magazines such as *Albedo One*, *Chiaroscuro*, *InterNova*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *New Genre* and *Strange Horizons*, and anthologies such as *TEL: Stories and From The Trenches*. His YA novel *The Beast With Nine Billion Feet* (Zubaan/Penguin) is scheduled to appear in 2008.



Talk Is Cheap

Geoff Ryman

Geoff Ryman was born in Canada, moved the the USA when he was eleven, and then to England after earning degrees in History and English at UCLA. He currently lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. His novels include *The Unconquered Country*, *The Child Garden*, *Was*, *Lust*, *Air*, *The King's Last Song* and the interactive *253* (ryman-novel.com), also printed in 1998.

It's first thing and I'm already out Walking and listening for Jinny. *I dream of Jeannie ref* Stephen Foster *19th century composer in* Minstrel *tradition. Jin as in* cotton gin, Eli Whitney. Gin, *prohibition, speakeasies, the* pansy craze, *the 18th amendment…*

A blizzard of links and none of them from her. Culture bores me, but I added it to my priorities because of Jinny.

She's a continual stream of beautiful little visual notes, flowers with sheep's heads or entire false catalogues for museums of anachronisms. Bakelite handsets on *Flash Gordon* spaceships (*produced three serials the first being in 1936* etc, etc…) *Collab music 2030 craze of different flavours from different eras…*

I love it that Jinny wants to share so much with me, with everyone. She shares continually, even when she's working, sometimes when she's sleeping, through her Turing. I always have my Turing turned off.

I love Jinny's teeth. Yes, I know, that's the bacteria gnawing away – no links, please. I just love her bright white teeth. They protrude and gleam so that Jinny always looks as though she's smiling.

Her Turing seems to touch my arm and the touch feels like sunlight. Everything out here is brushed by sunlight, still cool, a delicate rose colour, not at all like sunset or the bleaching white light of noon. I'm walking out of our little town through scant agriculture modelled on that of the Mayans…wide planted corn and beans under shade. I'm going to check our river.

The Turing and I walk together, she in my head. It's monitored that something's bothering me, and sends me one of Jinny's little packages, a history of charitable acts, all folded, crisp and delicious like a spring roll:

the refusal of the UK to retaliate for the bomb
the Bill Gates bequest and its long history
the arrival of Concurrency as a medium of exchange
the abolishing of copyright

If you prioritise charity, caritas and acts of breathtaking neutrality, you also apparently tend to prioritise effectiveness, weightlessness, spoons, weeds, ants and old gramophone recordings. How Jinny gets that I don't know, but I can see the files weave. It works. She just does it, mixes things, makes things.

I can't keep up. The packet keeps blossoming out, laced with all kinds of daffy Jinny things. They make me smile; they make me despair because I would like to keep her, like to stay part of her world. But I don't do this, make all those gifts of info.

"It's not content, it's the act that's important," I say. It sounds grumpy even to me.

"Of course," the Turing answers. "But projecting is an act too." Of a kind, and there is so much of it at so little cost to anyone. Talk is cheap.

"What is she really doing now?" I ask.

"I… I could wake her if you like," says the Turing.

"No, no," I say. I want Jinny to sleep. I can imagine her, all soft and warm and dreamy. I love that image of her; my heart pines, sinking again.

I walk naked in our beautiful desert sun, and I smell sage and dust all around me. Wind sweeps along the arroyo.

For years since my Joey died, I've been putting out feelers for other people. An old guy like me. Even to me it's like I'm peeking out of my snail shell, oozing out soft antennae, hoping to find love. Yuck.

I must have reccied seven hundred people. Jinny was one of the few who reached back. She said our profiles matched. They didn't, but we kept talking. We kept almost meeting. That 'almost' makes my heart sore. It makes me think that she's just being polite; she's just being friendly; I'm an embarrassment, she wants me to go away but won't say so.

The Turing hears me think that. "That's not true." The thing touches me again on the arm, invisible, but soothing. "She especially wants me to talk to you."

It's a strange situation. Both of us want me to win her love. But neither of us have succeeded. I have this numbing idea that she can't really respect or like me, but that there is, or may be only at times, something simple about me that she likes, and I feel very lucky and very sad, because this simple something is probably quite fragile. It could blow away.

She's a Doctor for heaven's sake. Only Infotechs get more respect and that's kind of a branch of medicine, and anyway she freelances as one of those as well.

Me, I'm only a Walker. I go places, confirm that reality matches our models, that all our balanced and merged priorities are being met.

I'm following an irrigation canal, the sun growing stronger on my skin. I feel photosynthesis kick in, to power the tech that inhabits me. My body and my tools are fuelled by the same sugars, the same blood. And my feet grow their own shoes.

"Oh," people say when I tell them who I am, "well you must be strapping fit." They don't know what else to say; they're embarrassed. A necessary task, but not really dazzling is it? It's not healing people, or advancing the genome. It's not combining information. The Techs engineer info like mutant DNA. It keeps re-combining. *Hi! I'm a mutant idea!*

In all the Fictions that whiz by so entertainingly these days, the walking is all done by robots. That's how automatic people think my work is. Only, guess what, dream on fellow travellers, there is no AI. There are just us Walkers, alone, on our appointed rounds.

A few days ago she said, the real Jinny not her Turing: "I want to go with you on one of your walks." This was imaginative and sweet and careful of my feelings, as if what I do were interesting, as if we might share insights as we stroll.

"Do you have the right shoes?" I asked her.

She giggled and barraged me with a million files on shoes prioritised by Uselessness.

The most Useless shoes she indexed were made out of chocolate. They melt or crumble and stain the floor.

"You made those up!"

"No, no, they're real!" she protested. "The Sybarites really made delicious shoes you could eat!"

She kept on linking and projecting and I didn't know if she was joking or not, a whole range of hopping, useless shoes:

shoes that obey simple heuristics to spin spider webs as you walk
shoes that sing
shoes that know all the constellations
shoes that sail the seven seas all by themselves out of interest; sweet except that they love making sea turtles abort their egg sacs
shoes with delicious new recipes tickertaping across their soles
shoes that calculate values of pi
shoes that suck up any thing with a positive charge
shoes that keep scuttling away from you the moment you take them off

"Stop!" I laughed. Creativity scares me. I always think it's going to run away with us. My real priority is rectitude.

I'm at the edge of our creek, standing on a rock shelf that's grey with dead lichen.

I try and put it off. I kneel down and sip water from my cupped hand and it's cool and tastes of granite, and the sensors understand

its qualities. The water is just as people want it. The Joshua Trees stand around me like friends, holding up their arms as if to show that they're honest. I smell sage and dust all around me. Today is the day I scheduled months ago to test levels once again, now when the snows upstream are supposed to melt.

I wade in, my legs reading the depth and flow.

Yep. Welp. Here it is.

The water may be delicious but we're using too much of it. Current and projected population; water usage average preferred and necessary all rattle past me.

Soon we won't have enough water. Soon as in say five years.

Nothing is simple, except for reality. Reality is a tiny white stable dot in the middle of all this info. Everything else, all the talk, is piled up sky high, prioritised, processed and offered back. Mr Cranky, my old mean streak, would say that folks could just as easily test the water themselves. They could all take turns confirming.

Later Jinny, the real Jinny, connects to whisper that tomorrow she wants to join me on my Walk.

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She shows up in reality. I see her coming and I can feel my arms tense up, specifically my arms for some reason. For her I'm wearing shorts, how old fashioned. I worry about the creases age has made across my skinny stomach.

It's cool dawn. The sunlight catches her sideways. Her skin has a perfect pink glow, her smile is ready on her face like she's come back from a future where everything works. And she's wearing serious shoes.

She says hi, I say hi. Our PAs do a quick exchange to look at the day's tasks. If she was in any doubt before, Jinny will now know for sure that I'm the bottom of the social heap. Everybody sets priorities together and I just check them out. I guess she wants to see what that's like.

So she's going to do air quality analysis for me, and keep track of wind direction, humidity, acidity, all that stuff as it changes over time and distance. I'm going to do street semiology, traffic absence, and basic demographics. There's numbers, and there's graphs, but what counts is being able to say how all of this will land for people with very different Priorities. Oh, and here's another thrill: I'm checking for termites.

Me, I'm a Dog man. Really, that's what I'm now called. People with my nest of Priorities get called Dogs because we value faithfulness, trust, and constant grooming. We like repetition but we want to get to know things too, so we like to go out sniffing and snooping. I'm in the perfect job.

Oops, I've been telling her all that. She nods, looking slightly glazed and distracted. "How's your gout?"

She means the pains in my feet. She remembers stuff.

"Medication. Little critters are eating up those crystals."

"You should have come to me for that!"

If she can't love me, then maybe we can still be friends. I can use friends too. I feel an idiot grin on my face, just to have her near me, and I can't think of anything to say.

She's not just a doctor. Naw, that wouldn't occupy her. She runs a business on the side as a Bespoke Prioritiser. She probably needs a whole lake of homeopathic info to store her credits. I want to ask her dumb questions such as: do you rank for anybody who's well crucial? I don't ask, but she answers anyway.

"Naw, not really. Most of mine are overseers needing to find balance. One of them wanted every single thing about the Buddha itemised, ranked, and prioritised around something 'innovative'. He didn't say what, just something, anything zazzie and chic. Do you know how complicated Buddhism is? All those different Ways? Minayana, Therevada, Zen…"

"Not as big as Hinduism."

She laughs lazily, and I don't know if it's because what I said was charmingly irrelevant or not. I was, of course, being entirely serious. She touches my arm again, grooming. "I gave him a package centred on the need to keep records as the main criteria." Maybe she sees her job as part of the same hazy joke. "Buddhism as an aid to bureaucracy."

We're alone outside, the streets press in close around us. It's not a particularly nice day and the village is still asleep. Who walks except Walkers?

Our streets wind, houses close together, friendly, with shared doorways between them, rooftop pathways across them, and all around us on the slopes, turbines white as doves that turn in our arroyo winds. On some roofs, fleshsails catch the sun and make sugar.

Folks still have to have things in reality. Paint which adjusts to temperature and heats the rooms. The grafts which grow some of the houses, or the mud bricks baked in kilns, or the wires and circuits that also work like spiders to spin more wires and circuits. Some houses are made of flowers, growing. Some are made of laterite for people who love the miracle of mined dirt oxidising into stone; others are stacked shitcakes dried and sterilised. Those match people who value self-sufficiency. Plenty of those still since the time of the troubles.

"Semiologising," Jinny says and chuckles.

"We're about to metastasise," I say. Our village will split, probably along Predator/Herbivore lines. I guess the Predators will make us poor Herbivores move again.

"Dogs aren't herbivores," she reminds me. But there is a glow of agreement coming off her. Like me, she's clocked this crowding of styles, the closely packed fabric of the town almost not quite on the edge of mismatch, conflict.

Partition they tell us is fun, good. New birth is always good. "Water's the problem," she says. And I wonder, how did she get hold of that?

"Didn't you report that yesterday? We're running out of water."

We make our own sugar from the sun; our gut makes a lot of our protein. Our own bodies fuel the information which now lives as part of us. In the right climate, we could live without anything else, for a time at least. Except for water.

"Not run out so much as that it will trigger the break up."

Our home. It will go.

We walk, I watch her. She's not just confirming, she's filtering, scanning her takes through all kinds of priorities from government diaries to chaotic monitors. She's making something interesting out of my boring job.

"This is fun," she says. "It's reassuring. It all works." The movement of her hands takes in our settlement, the network as a whole, the desert landscape in cool morning. The soft pink light on the ridges, the deep kindly mauve in the canyons.

"For now," I say.

She looks at the streets that coil about us. "I want to go inside the houses and swap with people."

"You don't need to go inside to do that."

"I mean for real, one-to-one like us now." She starts to giggle and footnote all kinds of sociologies. "Come on, keep up the semio."

I riff. "Deeply social creatures needing each other for physical shelter and to keep at bay a sense of threat to their highly complex culture. Being dependent on weather, they are also frightened and resentful of it. Spaces are designed to minimise the impact of sun,

wind, rain, cloud, night, day. Needlessly, in some ways, as they are actually more independent of the environment than at any point in human history. They love info, they value preservation of it, but they have a low priority for actual experience, thus the low priority for physical transport. Me, I want to walk through the Rockies. Beyond that, fearful of a loss of a single member, driving a mix of socialisation and isolation caused by the intimacies of info."

"None of that footnotes." She looks distracted. I feel inside her that a thesaurus of names from Saussure to Tamagocuchi is flurrying past with no matches.

"None of that was a quote." She means it's harder to put in a tree. She blurts out a chuckle. "I'll just have to quote you!"

That's why she likes me: because I say new things. I'm flattered.

On a flat roof, sunbathers. Jinny wants to eyeball them. She calls hello. Silence. They remain on their soft roof, naked, sleeping in sunlight.

"Conflicting priorities for communication and independence," I remind her. It's a joke. She doesn't laugh, she grimaces. She waves. She jumps up and down and calls. I just know she's buzzing them with feelers. She sends them and me a gift of niche priorities, a lovely lavender suggestion for emphasising open plan living and geneswapping as a substitute for reproduction.

The people on the roof behave like plants. I mistake them for Herbivores. One of them finally says aloud, not looking up, "I'm not really here."

"We're Dolphins," murmurs the other and they share a sarky smile. They are both identical, which means they've morphed. Into each other. Yuck.

"They're Sharks," Jinny says downturning her mouth quickly to mean *let's get out of here*. Sharks prioritise winning and making good use of you. This new astrology of priority. It really works.

"What are you?" the two Predators ask in unison.

Jinny bursts out laughing and shakes her head. "I'm a Hamster!" The absurdity of a Hamster facing Sharks. "No, really. I prioritise…" She shakes her head cos it's all too silly.

"Activity," I say for her. I'm a bit surprised that she's something, well, so humble and sweet.

"Running in circles," she chuckles again. Already we are walking away from the Sharks and talking only for each other.

I list a few other Hamster priorities for her. "Functional feeding only. Clear goals."

I have to admit it does sound slightly comic, this lean yet nourished looking woman taller than I am calling herself a Hamster. "Hamsters are harmless," she says. "Harmless and delighted."

So you like Dogs because we're harmless too. I'm thinking that maybe Jinny likes old guys, tall lanky old guys because everybody else is round and soft. She's done comfort, she's done fast, she's done young and handsome. She's lonely. How did she end up lonely? Long story. I hope to hear it.

Next job, we confirm bacteria and virus levels and then spend the rest of the day counting numbers of beneficial insects and useful information retroviruses… *All's Quiet on the Western Front, Remarque*… I actually start producing footnotes from priorities of my own. I feel like I'm flying.

"We couldn't do medicine without Walkers," she says.

The next day and there's nothing from her. I was expecting all kinds of links, packages, even conclusions. I was quite proud of some of the stuff I gave her. Shitcakes as a marker of independence, itself a marker of fear. I really had given of my best. Nothing came of it apparently. She'd been smiling in order to keep a distance, was that it? *How nice he is and how desperately dull, really.*

Again, it's happening again.

My stomach sinks, I feel despair. There is no poetry that footnotes when really nice women don't call back. Was she just pretending then, to be nice? The way you placate an embarrassing link-partner who runs out of material, or a genepooling that bellyflops?

I do get a call from Spotty Derek. He really is terribly spotty, something to do with his mitochondrial communications but he's deeply sweet. After all we're both Walkers. He's skinny as a toothpick, though there's something sheep-like in his gaze that makes him button-cute so that people forgive his being smart and an overseer at 18.

"Watchinit," he twerps at me. "You landed one yesterday. FRD. QED. Whoa!" I think he means my date. If that is what it was. He looks pleased for me. I wait, because he'll have a comment. He starts to chuckle. "Shitcakes as what? A bit tenuous."

"I thought it was OK."

"Yeah, but your job is to Confirm, not invent. Whose priorities were those?"

Mine, I realise. My priorities. Nobody gives a shit about those. My priorities might skew the measure. I'm not paid to confirm things that are important to me.

And what do I want to have confirmed?

That I have a heart, have a soul? I really thought she wanted to please me, I really thought she wanted me. Good at faking, I guess. All that bedside manner stuff, all that selling her gift priorities to the higher-ups, I guess it makes you professionally pleasant, effortlessly charming.

Derek is still chuckling, and gives me a hug by feeler. "You can move in with me if you like." He doesn't mean it. He's very kind. And very bossy. The amount of understanding it takes to be like him takes my breath away and intimidates me a bit. His authority creeps up on you. You don't notice it at first. He looks like Sam out of *Pickwick Papers*, and please keep the footnote.

He's a Madonna. Priorities: power and nurturing. And yeah, I'd do a trans for him in a second and have his babies, which he knows, and likes, but will never do anything about, except to use that underlying warmth to make me like him and do what I'm told.

"You – uh – should reconfirm those figures on water," he says. Before we all panic, he means. We're all so low key and calm.

"Yeah," I say as if he'd said, weather's nice today.

"Ahhh watchinit…" he says, all I get is a strong blast of something hearty, cheerful and dismissive. I give him a blast of something else.

"Just wait till it gets political. Just wait till you try to separate us by priority, by info type. And you lose your wife, or your brother refuses to talk to you, or it all gets tense and nasty, and out of nowhere, suddenly nice-enough people become thugs. Very quiet, very smiling, neighbourly thugs, and if it's not you who move out, it will be over your dead body. Not theirs!"

"Sorry," he says and something gentle and distant like the sound of surf washes out from him.

"You weren't there!" I relent a bit. "You're too young."

So I head out again to the creek. Today I'll check downstream as well. But I'm all unwanted downloads, spam, reccies like wasps. Everybody else is scattered. *Water, we can't do without water. Is that Walker nuts or something?* I just don't care.

So I do what I promised myself I would not do. I send out feelers again to Jinny.

Where are you, what system you in? Did you enjoy reality? Nice Walk, wasn't it? Did you think so? Did it measure up, or was it all a bit dull and lifeless?

Nothing.

Oh for heaven's sake, I tell myself, give it a rest.

I really am a Dog, I really do need to be petted and stroked. I promised myself I'd let potential lovers come to me. Only if they wanted to and when they wanted to, so I would know they meant it. Just let someone else do the chasing and the chancing for a change.

But I really thought yesterday had been good. It felt so good to be with her, just to talk or not to talk, just to walk, see some bricks, taste some air and let her prattle on, dumping all this wonderful stuff. She's fine for me. She'll do. I don't want anything else. I just want her to touch me back. I just want her to want me.

So I'm walking through the village and at that exact moment, I see her, outside for real. She's on that flat roof. She's huddled under a blanket with the two Sharks, smoking weed.

I'm angry.

I stomp on ahead. I project something-anything and for some reason all that comes out is: *Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds…* What am I doing? Pony Express? Do I really have a major priority to make an idiot of myself?

"Faithful," Jinny says, aloud. She smiles hazily to her predator friends, shrugs off the blanket, and crouches down on the edge of the roof. "As you see, I connected." She means with the Sharks.

"Yeah, I can see."

"It was a lot of work." I think she means she went back and spent a lot of time eyeballing them. She either has a lot to share with me or a lot she can't be arsed to share.

"More of a challenge than someone it's easy to connect with." I'm trying not to look disappointed. No, I'm trying not to look hurt.

No, I am trying not to cry. In the street. If there is a single particle of cruelty in her, it will come out now.

Those gnawing teeth highlight the downturning of her mouth. Somehow she's suddenly flipped down from the roof onto the ground. "Don't be like that," she says.

"Like how?" The words swell out of my throat like knocked elbows.

"Angry," she says. "Look, come on, let's walk."

Mr Cranky says, "You're not wearing anything, it's early, it's windy."

"Well, yeah, so we better walk to warm up. Come on." She flicks her fingers towards herself. "Come here." She puts an arm around me, and pulls. "The Sharks don't want to push the Herbivores out this time. They want to move. After all they're Sharks, they have to keep moving to breathe."

I taste our dust in the air; it's spicy, the taste of home.

She gives me a little shake. "They're the kind of people who wanted to go to the stars. The Bears, the Pumas, the domestic Cats…"

Then she footnotes how Dogs are really Wolves, noble beasts who care for their own and live in packs, the most sociable of creatures, how they keep each other warm. Jinny's arms are cold, so I hold her and her shoulders and arms feel smooth and soft. I chafe them a bit, and we start to walk, bouncing files back and forth between us. And all around us, the fleshsails fill with sunlight, the windmills turn, our purple skins seethe with sugars fuelling the eyes, the implants, the GMs, the receiving bones, all that information babbling powered away.

"Anyway we're not Herbivores or Predators any more. That's just leftover emotional garbage." She smiles again. "We're more like plants."

Sometimes it all comes right. Sometimes something like love is possible. We come to the edge of the town.

I feel humorous. "I'd just like to confirm that rampant fancying combined with a kind heart are possible."

"Then," she says, "the future's good." ✡

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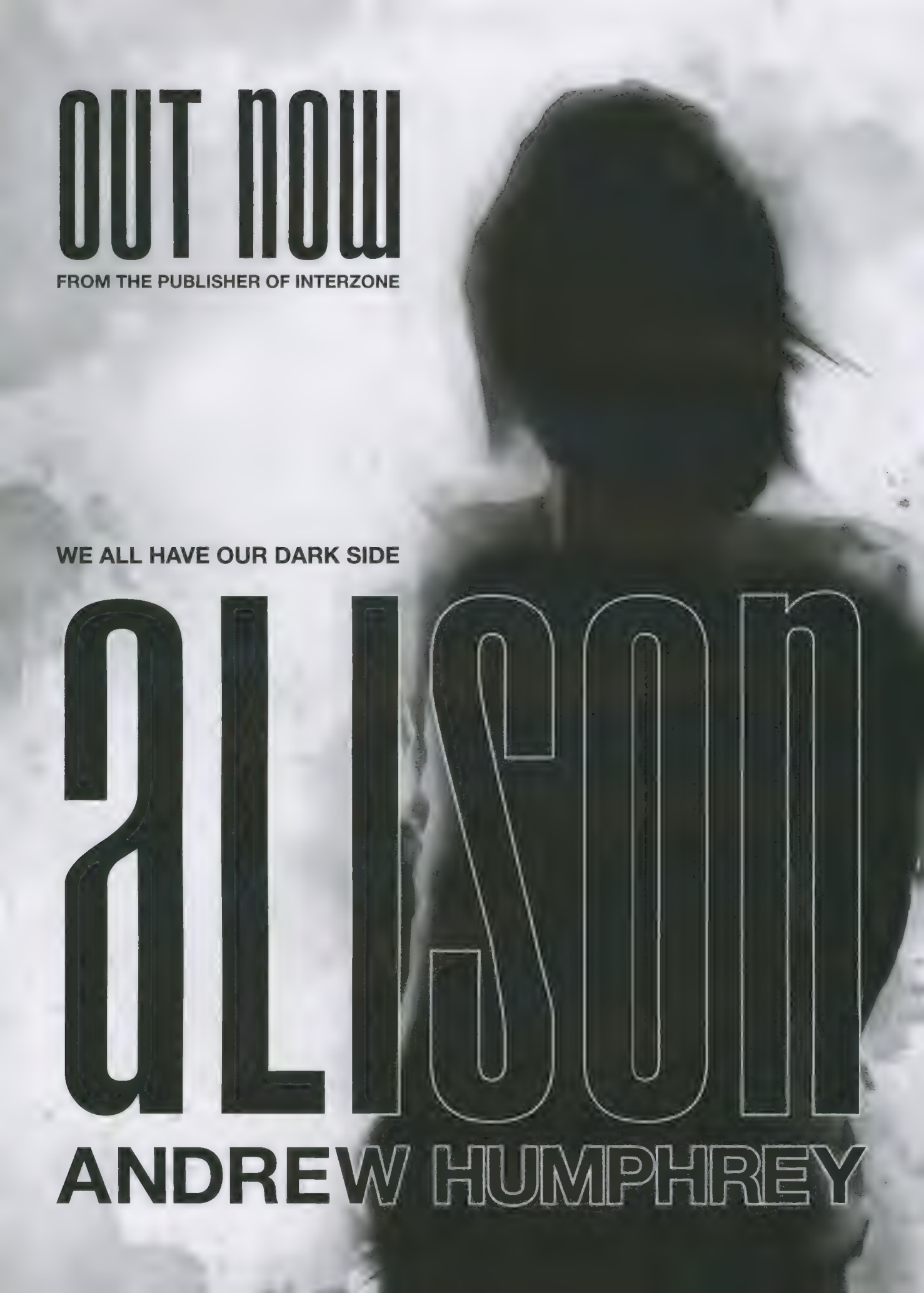
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GREG EGAN
BEYOND THE VEIL OF REALITY

INTERVIEW BY JETSE DE VRIES

Greg Egan is one of the modern masters of SF. After a few short stories in Australian markets, his first international publication was in *Interzone* #18 (Winter 86/87). Since then a string of highly inventive short stories – mostly, but not exclusively, appearing in *Interzone* and *Asimov's* – marked him as a major new talent, at the cutting edge of the genre.

His first audacious SF novel *Quarantine* appeared in 1992, followed by *Permutation City* (1994) and *Distress* (1995). As he mastered the long form with an increasingly confident voice, he rose to prominence as a novelist as well. Throughout the nineties, he also kept writing short fiction, which together with his novels *Diaspora* (1997), *Teranesia* (1999), and *Schild's Ladder* (2002) fortified his position as the field's leading hard SF practitioner. However, 'Singleton' (*Interzone* #176) was – together with *Schild's Ladder* – his only published fiction in 2002.

A writing hiatus of almost four years followed as Egan became involved with the plight of refugees in Australian detention camps. Then, in late 2005, his story 'Riding the Crocodile' appeared in the *One Million AD* anthology, followed by more short stories ('Glory', 'Dark Integers', 'Induction', 'Steve Fever' and 'Crystal Nights' [*Interzone* #215]). Gollancz have now reissued his complete back catalogue as mass market paperbacks to coincide with the May 15th publication of new novel *Incandescence*, which is on special offer to *Interzone* readers (see ad top left).

In February, Orion re-released your complete back catalogue as mass market paperbacks with new cover art. What do you think about this, and how do you like the new, consistently themed, cover art?
I'm absolutely delighted about the re-release of the books, because it's actively promoting them to a new generation of readers who came to SF in the last five years, and who might otherwise never have encountered them. I did like some of the previous covers very much, especially *Luminous* and *Schild's Ladder*, but I understand the commercial reasons for the new, consistent look. Persuading bookshop managers that they should devote a few centimetres of shelf space to someone called 'Egan' between the metre of Eddings and the metre of Feist is no easy task.

One overarching theme in your fiction is the quest for the true inner workings of reality. Has your fiction always been intended as – let's say – thought experiments about how the Universe might work, or did that aspect enter the equation later on?
I've been interested in science for as long as I've been interested in writing, and it was always clear to me that the two would end up entwined, but it wasn't always obvious what kind of niche I'd find within science fiction as a whole. I can enjoy writing fiction for all kinds of reasons, and I even published some horror stories early in my career, but the work that's been both most satisfying for me to write and the most well-received tends to involve peeling back the layers of reality and reaching something deeper. Now, that might mean some extravagant piece of speculative physics, or it might involve coming to terms with things we already know about the human condition. Of everything I've written, my favourite is still a story called 'Reasons to be Cheerful', which peels back the layers of ordinary life and looks at the nature and origins of happiness.

Our senses form our window to the world, and are fine-tuned to a certain environment. Is our limited perception a barrier to our understanding of the true world, or can our brains overcome those limitations? Do we need to evolve (as in *Teranesia*), or transform our minds to software (as in *Diaspora* and *Schild's Ladder*) to really be able to get a grip on reality?
The people who turn observations of the microwave background radiation into maps of the early universe, or interpret the results of particle collider experiments using quantum field theory, have exactly the same brains as people who chipped arrowheads out of stone. We've already gone far beyond our perceptions and our innate models of the world, and there's no reason why we can't continue to grasp ever more sophisticated concepts. Of course, some kinds of thinking come far more easily to us than others, and there are biologically-imposed limits on our speed, our memory, our powers of concentration, and our lifespans, which I suspect we will eventually take steps to overcome. But I think there's a sense in which there's nothing interesting the universe is capable of doing that a patient, motivated, healthy, long-lived person from the Bronze Age couldn't understand. Once you can reason abstractly, that's all you really need; the rest is just a matter of convenience.

Do you think everything is knowable, can be analysed and understood, or are there certain areas that will forever remain a mystery?
It's easy to come up with questions where we can't yet even imagine what would constitute a final answer: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why are the deepest laws of physics the way they are? It's conceivable to me that there might never be meaningful answers to these questions, in which case we'll probably conclude that they're not so much mysteries as non-questions, but equally, something might happen that changes our perspective. Certainly, in the medium term there are still so many interesting things to be discovered that I can't see our descendants hitting any kind of barrier for a long, long time. And even if we reach the bottom of fundamental physics, and end up saying "This is the equation of the theory of everything – and there's no prospect of explaining why it's this equation and not a different one," people will still have a billion questions worth pursuing about the kind of things we can actually do in a universe that obeys that equation.

One could view the search for the true fabric of reality as one step; the next step might be to ask for the meaning of it all. Is (the search for) the meaning of life meaningless in itself (ie an anthropocentric fallacy), is the search for the answers part of it, or must one fill in that meaning for oneself?
I'm not a Buddhist, but when the Dalai Lama says "The purpose of life is to be happy and useful," I have no argument with that. Of course there's plenty of room for people to disagree about what's useful. But now that we've escaped from religion, I don't have any interest in secular versions of the old game where we were supposed to guess what the creator had in mind for us. People who start talking about the destiny of humanity or the purpose of consciousness need to be doused with cold water as quickly as possible.

Understanding the universe is certainly one way to be happy and useful, and it's important that someone does it because we need to know the rules that govern what's possible for all of us. In the far future, if people are living without scarcity in virtual realities they can change at will – with personalities they can change at will – the biggest challenges will come from confronting those aspects of reality that can't be changed simply by snapping your fingers.

By coincidence, this interview will appear in our special Mundane-SF issue. What is your opinion on Mundane-SF? Do you think some of your stories – like 'Learning To Be Me', or 'Yeyuka' for example – can be seen as Mundane-SF?
'Yeyuka' probably qualifies as Mundane, but 'Learning To Be Me' was about nanotech-driven mind uploading!

I can sympathise to some degree with the frustration the proponents of Mundane-SF feel about the way certain fashionable technological tropes are treated as magical solutions to all our problems, but the bottom line for me is that interesting, relevant fiction can include all kinds of technological scenarios. We should try to avoid clichés, and glibness, and absurdity, but those literary failings are possible whatever the technological background of the story.

One of the issues Mundane-SF touches upon is ethics. A main point being that humanity should not expand into outer space before it learns to live responsibly on the Earth itself. Now, in most of your fiction where humanity has reached for the stars – *Diaspora*, *Schild's Ladder* and, indeed, *Incandescence* – humanity, or its descendants, all behave in a strong ethical manner. Do you think ethics will evolve alongside technological progress?
I am quite optimistic in the long term, and if I wasn't I wouldn't bother writing SF at all; I'd rather make my living digging ditches than writing about interstellar wars,



Gollancz paperbacks, £7.99 each

or colonialism via wormholes, or female infanticide in the twenty-fifth century. I do believe that if we succeed in solving our most pressing material problems globally, there's a chance that might lead to less conflict, and over time the idea of using violence will become increasingly unacceptable. Of course, even spectacularly wealthy people are capable of enormous greed and barbarity, but for many of us, once we have a reasonable degree of safety and comfort our natural tendency is to become less aggressive. You can contrive scenarios where even very advanced civilisations face a form of scarcity, if they insist on growing frantically at the maximum possible rate, but if enlightened self-interest can't win out over perverse stupidity even at that level, then we really are all screwed.

Talking about ethics, after the release of *Schild's Ladder* you pulled back from writing, and got strongly involved with the fate of refugees in Australia, and especially with the trials of Peter Qasim. How did that start? Were you already involved with these issues, 'being jolted by events surrounding the *Tampa*' and decided to dedicate more time to them, or was it also a case of intellectual burnout after finishing the immensely audacious *Schild's Ladder*?
For the benefit of readers who might not know what we're talking about, the *Tampa* was a Norwegian merchant vessel that picked up a group of about 400 asylum seekers whose boat sank as they were trying to reach Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean. When the *Tampa* itself tried to dock at Christmas Island, the Australian government sent in troops to board it, to prevent the asylum seekers from lodging refugee claims under Australian law. Eventually they ended up in detention camps on Nauru.

At that time, August 2001, I'd had no prior involvement with refugee issues, and though I was disgusted by what had happened it wasn't clear to me that there was anything useful I could do. It took me another six months to educate myself about the whole detention regime, and make contact with the organisations that were trying to change it. I began writing to people in some of the mainland detention centres, and not long after that I started visiting them in person. That was quite surreal. These were completely harmless people, but the centres were like high-security prisons, mostly in very remote places. And there were thousands of people who had had their asylum claims refused but could not be deported, so they were still locked up after several years.

I ended up spending the next four years mostly just trying to help people cope with their situation. It's an enormous mental strain to be locked up indefinitely, with no idea when you'll be released or what will happen to you. There were children who grew up in these prisons, who thought everyone in the world lived under guard behind razor-wire fences. Eventually the government started reviewing people's cases, and the vast majority ended up with protection visas, but only after an enormous amount of harm had been done to them.

"The main thing I wanted to do was write about a low-tech culture facing a challenge that was very tough for them, and very different from anything in our own history, but completely grounded in known physics. That left room to write about a galactic culture that wasn't facing a catastrophe or cosmic revelations of its own"

I understand that Peter Qasim has been released, after almost seven years of detention. Are you still in contact with him?
Peter's situation was especially hard, because he'd agreed to be returned to his country of origin, India, but India refused to acknowledge his citizenship and take him back. The Australian High Court ruled that people who can't be deported can be kept in immigration detention indefinitely, and that's how the law still stands. Under political pressure, the Minister for Immigration gave Peter a temporary visa in 2005 – after being locked up for six years and ten months – but he doesn't have permanent residency yet. I'm still in touch with him, and I'm hopeful that his status will be resolved fairly soon.

The asylum seeker problem is a highly complex one. Given that in some of your stories – like 'Axiomatic', 'Chaff', 'Cocoon' and 'Reasons To Be Cheerful' – you propose that our behaviour, including our ethics, is encoded in our brains, and then extrapolate that, in the future, this can be changed at will: should we then 'reprogram' everybody's brains to the

best ethical behaviour? Or is it better to educate everybody?
I suspect that if the technology was available tomorrow, there'd be a significant demand from people wanting to become more aggressive and competitive, rather than more empathetic. But if I could reprogram myself, I think what I'd aim for is a kind of clarity: rather than, say, simply dialling down my natural selfishness to the point where I turned into a doormat who'd be exploited by everyone else, I'd rather take steps to ensure that my judgement was less clouded by the kind of emotions that cause us to take selfishness far beyond the need for self-preservation. If I had to write a marketing campaign for this technology, I'd try to sell people on 'emotional intelligence' rather than 'ethics'; nobody really wants to be a saint, but everyone would like to be smarter.

There's also the issue of whether people are entitled, not just to educate their children, but to manipulate them before birth to provide a stronger neurological basis for behaviour that the parents see as desirable. If that ever did happen, I'd rather see children who were simply smarter and more self-aware in general, rather than being mentally bullied by some new form of compulsion that we'd wired into them in place of our own ancestral drives. I do think we should be incredibly cautious with this kind of thing, though in the long term we're going to have to face it in some form. I believe that even people who are uploaded as software will want to have children who retain many of their own ancestral traits; we all want our children to have better lives than ours, but nobody wants to give birth to something completely alien. Everything will be up for scrutiny, though, and it will be the exception rather than the rule for parents to leave things entirely to chance and heredity.

In 2005 you returned to writing, with 'Riding the Crocodile' in *One Million AD*. It's a precursor to *Incandescence* that leaves the reader hungry for more: Leila and Jasim – citizens of the galactic disc called the Amalgam – explore the centre of the galaxy, inhabited by the Aloof, of which very little is known. They do find out a few things, but the central question about the Aloof remains (to be solved in *Incandescence*). Did you write 'Riding the Crocodile' as a teaser for *Incandescence*, or was it written before the novel?
I was halfway through *Incandescence* when Gardner Dozois invited me to write a story for the anthology. I'd already mentioned the bridging of the Amalgam's network with the Aloof's as part of the background in the novel, and it occurred to me that it could be interesting to tell the story of it in detail.

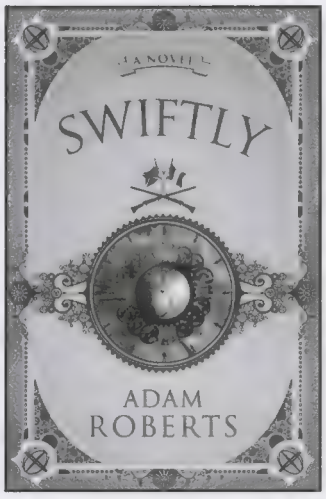
The central mystery of *Incandescence* is the behaviour of the Aloof, but the Amalgam's behaviour also puzzles me. They're near-immortal, and seem quite content with their lot. On the one hand, one might expect that boredom would be a major problem, on the other hand one might expect that they could indulge in huge, long term projects. Neither seem to happen much, so how do they cope? Have they edited out, or toned down their capacity for both ennui and curiosity?
Leila and Jasim live a relatively simple life, prior to the challenge they set for themselves before dying, but even that simple life includes access to the whole of the Amalgam's culture and scientific discoveries, which you could spend millennia studying and interpreting. At this point in history most of the galaxy has been explored, and all testable questions in fundamental physics have been settled, so many people who want to encounter something new are involved in mathematics, like the quadrupeds in *Incandescence* and the xenomathematicians in 'Glory'. Mathematics is not a spectacular endeavour, but a culture's curiosity isn't measured by the scale of its engineering projects. Of course people can edit their personalities, but not everyone would make the same choices. In *Incandescence*, Rakesh would have made a conscious decision not to simply banish his restlessness, but to put up with being bored and dissatisfied for a while to see where that took him.

Half the novel deals with insect-like aliens eking out a living in an extremely hostile place: a rock orbiting through the plasma accretion disc around a black hole (and things get worse). How did you come up with that scenario?
I wanted to write about an alien culture that learns the laws of gravity by a completely different route than the one we took. So I chose the environment of the Splinter, because astronomy is almost impossible for its inhabitants – they can't discover Kepler's Law the way we did – but other aspects of gravity are very prominent, such as the pattern of weights that varies throughout the Splinter.

One of the assumptions in *Incandescence* is that panspermia – the spreading of viable biological matter from one planet to another – has seeded the galaxy with a diversity of life, which supposedly originates in the galactic disc where "the radiation levels were reasonably low, and such biosphere-sterilising calamities as supernovae were relatively rare." Then the mysterious Lahl describes a meteor inside the galactic bulge, riddled with DNA. The microbes Rakesh and Parantham find on that meteor are long dead, but how could the microbes that brought DNA into the core have survived the high radiation levels?
The galactic core is a tough environment for the reasons you quote, so the odds in general are worse for life, but that's not to say that the radiation is guaranteed to sterilise any meteor that comes in from the disc. A larger meteor that provided more shielding, carrying a different species of microbe, would have brought in the DNA. And as the novel demonstrates, the descendants of those microbes don't have an easy time.

Your previous 'huge-scale' novel *Diaspora* took on the exploration of the universe (or even multiverse) to an extreme end. Then the next 'universe-wide' novel *Schild's Ladder* literally changed the fabric of reality and extrapolated its implications. Compared to these predecessors, *Incandescence* seems somewhat restrained. Did you plan this as such, or did it just happen?
The main thing I wanted to do was write about a low-tech culture facing a challenge that was very tough for them, and very different from anything in our own history, but completely grounded in known physics. That left room to write about a galactic culture that wasn't facing a catastrophe or cosmic revelations of its own. In the long term, periods of radical discovery or great danger are going to comprise a very small part of our future; it was fun to write about that kind of thing in *Diaspora* and *Schild's Ladder*, but with the Amalgam I wanted to have a backdrop of stability, where the local dramas are very important if you happen to be caught up in them, but for most of the galaxy life goes on as normal.

By the time our readers see this interview, *Incandescence* should be released (by Gollancz in the UK, and by Nightshade Books in the US). Are you busy with a new novel, or new short fiction?
I'm working on a novel, a comedy about the geopolitics of virtual reality.



SWIFTLY
Adam Roberts
Gollancz, 368pp, £18.99 hb

Sometimes you wonder if Adam Roberts can write about an undamaged character. Abraham Bates, our 'hero', begins this novel as a depressive whose mental state is so febrile that he can swoop from the heights to the abyss and back again several times in the space of a page. He ends the book as a man sexually aroused by the sight, smell or even thought of human ordure. His companion and rival for much of the novel, the Dean of York, is addicted to a new type of snuff; this addiction brings on mood swings as wild and sudden as Bates's. Meanwhile their enamorata, Eleanor Burton, begins the novel as a young woman whose ignorance of sex (the date is 1848) leads to disgust and hence to frigidity; she ends the novel as a sexually rapacious adulteress for whom, like Bates, disgust is arousing.

Actually, I am not entirely convinced that this novel does not feature two entirely different women who happen to share the name Eleanor Burton. At the end of chapter two we leave the frigid Eleanor shortly after she has witnessed, without emotion, the grotesque murder of her first husband. She is, as the chapter ends, caring for her mother and negotiating to mortgage her London home in order to raise bail money for a treasure-seeker who has appealed to her. When next we encounter her, part way through chapter three, she is walking alone towards Yorkshire, and there is no further mention of murder, mother, mortgage or treasure-seeker; how and why she came to be in this place remains a mystery, and it is perhaps safest to assume that she is simply a new character appearing afresh in the novel at this point.

Such excess and discontinuity of character is typical of a novel that is, itself, full of excess, and often discontinuous in its leaps of plot. The excess starts with the novel's source material. As the title and the blurb point out, it is a continuation of sorts of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, though without any of the satiric intent. In this world the Lilliputians (and their neighbouring Blefuscans) have been colonized and enslaved by the British. As the novel goes on, while Roberts appropriates more and more of the Swiftian universe, we notice that one facet of Gulliver's journey is missing, the flying island of Laputa. In its place is another flying visitor, this time from outer space and also from yet another work that plays with different sizes of characters, Voltaire's *Micromegas* (the link is made explicit in the name of the extraterrestrial visitor, Littlebig).

There is excess also in the plot. Bates campaigns to free the Lilliputians, and in this has found himself working as an agent for the French, with whom Britain is now at war. Initial British success is reversed when the French unleash Brobdignagian troops, and Britain is soon invaded. With another turncoat, the Dean of York, Bates finds himself dispatched to Yorkshire accompanying a calculating device designed by Charles Babbage (though employing, we eventually learn, hidden Lilliputians). Along the way they meet Eleanor, but Bates falls ill, as do Eleanor and the Dean in their turn. The three recover, but everyone else who catches the plague dies. It turns out that the Lilliputians have gone to war against the humans by employing yet smaller creatures. Meanwhile yet larger creatures have arrived from space and seem to be going to war against humanity in their turn. In the midst of this three-way war of extinction, a succession of intriguing plot devices (such as the calculating machine), are mentioned and then quietly forgotten. A Lilliputian turncoat who helps Bates keeps disappearing from the book for huge swathes of time, only to reappear fortuitously just when he can rescue Bates then disappear again until the next time. And so it continues: coincidences, sudden reversals, leaps of faith across gaps in the plot that are never filled.

This is a novel that does indeed move swiftly, but it does so by piling on of invention while plot, coherence and sense are steadily buried under the weight of it all. **Paul Kincaid**

THE DRAGON'S NINE SONS
Chris Roberson
Solaris Books, 334pp, £10.99 pb

According to history, China's Imperial Treasure Fleet was decommissioned in the fifteenth Century – doomed never to carry its Empire across the globe. It's at this point where Roberson's timeline for *The Dragon's Nine Sons* diverges from our own history, where the Fleet actually crossed India and conquered most of the Western Hemisphere. Now fast forward to what would be the middle of the 21st Century in our calendar, and the Empire has spread into space and settled on Mars. It's a wonderfully unique setting for what is essentially a military sf novel, where the Empire's ancient enemy the Aztecs have flourished and eventually developed their own savage space vessels.

The story focuses on a group of prisoners, freed on bail and sent on a suicidal mission to destroy the enemy stronghold on an asteroid near Mars. Being a largely unlikeable band of murderers, thieves and subordinates, these heavily flawed characters are perhaps the only weak link in what is otherwise a solid story. With personalities and dialogue which make them feel a bit like a caricature of a Space Marine team, they feel slightly out of place in a setting which is otherwise trying to keep much of the cultural identities of two ancient civilisations.

This is perhaps a minor point, since Roberson has used his eloquent storytelling skills to elevate this story above other military sf. Indeed, he defies the nature of this genre with some well executed sf concepts, including his orbital elevator and the careful thought to the way combat and weaponry must necessarily operate in low gravity conditions.

Keeping his world-building contained within a relatively small area of the Solar System is another clever move on Roberson's part, with these enforced restrictions challenging him to keep thinking, delivering on the detail where it is needed and allowing him a base to branch out from in case *The Dragon's Nine Sons* develops into a series.

Roberson should be given credit for refusing to settle into a comfortable niche and continuing to bring original thought to whichever area of sf he decides to colonise. **Kevin Stone**

BOOKZONE

NEW SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME 2
Edited by George Mann
Solaris, 416pp, £7.99 pb

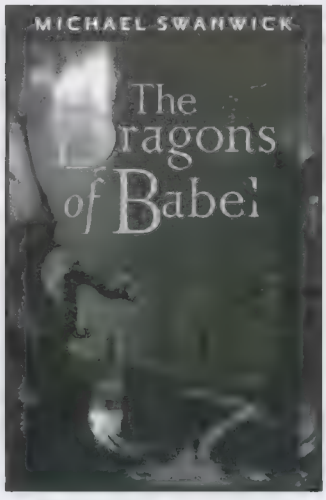
While the tsunami of themed anthologies shows little sign of abating, Solaris are calmly and quietly getting on with their rather unique little project: a series of *unthemed* anthologies of original short fiction. This second volume in the series collects a good variety of tales from some notable names from sf-nal pantheon.

There are a few flops. Kay Kenyon's 'Space Crawl Blues' is an example of an idea too big for the short fiction format, and cramming it into the space available makes for a trite betrayal tale that doesn't really hinge on the novum. Conversely, Eric Brown's 'Sunworld' seems too long: its ending is telegraphed too early, its sensawunda lessened by that slow approach. Chris Roberson's 'The Line Of Dichotomy' is a vanilla mil-sf yarn that fails to use the full potential of its setting, but which redeems itself somewhat with a sudden moral cliffhanger ending.

There are some real successes, too. Mary Robinette Kowal's 'Evil Robot Monkey' is the shortest piece and also the most memorable – it has followed me around for days, and promises to continue doing so for a while to come; Karl Schroeder shows signs of developing into BruceSterling2.0, embedding civilisational lessons we could do with relearning in the alt-history of 'Book, Theatre and Wheel'; 'Shining Armour' by Dominic Green crams all the potential merits of short sf into one convenient parcel – it's fun, witty, full of spectacle and very human.

And then there are all the others which, while they aren't phone-a-friend excellent, are still well worth the read – like the rambling cut'n'paste Jerry Cornelius time-slip of Michael Moorcock's 'Modem Times', Peter Watts' dark surveillance-society soliloquy 'The Eyes Of God', or Robert Reed's post-post-human love-story-in-disguise 'Fifty Dinosaurs'.

A cliché it may be, but there really is something for everyone here – and the roster of writers makes it an ideal bait to tempt those who only read novels to climb over the short fiction fence. Let's hope the economics of the market allow Solaris to keep this series running for some time to come. **Paul Raven**



"Babel is a wonderfully vivid and inventive construct. Neon bar signs and stretch limos share the streets with trolls and ghosts, while mobile phones and Blackberries are as vital a means of communication and information as the entrails of unfortunate small animals or blood-smeared statues"

THE DRAGONS OF BABEL
Michael Swanwick
Tor, 320pp, $25.95 hb

If Swanwick set out to challenge the conventions of genre fantasy in *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), then by the end of *The Dragons of Babel* he doesn't appear to have left many of then standing.

While it doesn't appear to be a sequel to *Daughter*, there are a number of parallels between the two works. Both feature a mortal or half-mortal orphaned or foundling adolescent protagonist (Jane as the eponymous Iron Dragon's Daughter, Will le Fey in *Babel*), who falls under the influence of a malevolent dragon. Both are set in the same (or a very similar) world in which magic and advanced technology exist alongside each other. But where *Daughter* was stepped in an atmosphere of Dickensian gloom, *Babel*, although no less dark in places, is more expansive.

The story starts when a wounded dragon crawls into the village and sets itself up as king. The dragon, Balthazaar, appoints Will as its lieutenant and intermediary. Under its seductive influence Will commits an act of atrocity which forces his exile from the village, even after he finally defeats the dragon.

Joining up with refugees from the war, he meets Esme, a little girl who has traded her memories for eternal childhood, and later Nat Whilk, conman and trickster, who takes Will on as both apprentice, and unwitting foil for his grandest scam, the 'Lost Prince', which he plans to pull on their arrival in Babel. Things, of course, never work out as planned. Nat is almost arrested, Will get separated and caught up with a band of underground revolutionaries led by self-styled Lord Weary, where he becomes Captain Jack Riddle, hero of the oppressed, before his revolutionary exploits are undercut by a very strange story twist in the middle of the book, by which I'm still undecided quite what Swanwick means.

Dragons of Babel is full of such switchback moments. Stories and stories within stories spin off in all directions from the main narrative. Characters appear, and then cross cut across the story from unexpected and surprising directions. It gives Babel (the city, as well as the novel) a dense lived-in feel, as if there is much more going on at any time than Swanwick can encompass in this already complex and hugely inventive novel.

Some of this is occasioned by the background preparation and length of time Nat needs to set up his grand scam, allowing Will to serve time as a runner and to assist in a murder invention for a mafia-style ghost politician, Salem Toussaint, in Babel's equivalent of a Harlem ghetto. It also gives Will time to get involved in adventures of his own, not all of which are compatible with Nat's plans, such as his pursuit of the hippogriff-riding Alcyone, who works in the Tower of Babel in the Department of Signs and Omens, and with whom Will has instantly (and unwisely) fallen in love.

Will has also brought problems of his own to Babel, including the demonic and accusatory 'Whisperer', and pursuit across Babel by the Burning Man.

Like Miéville's New Crobuzon, Swanwick's Babel is a wonderfully vivid and inventive construct. Neon bar signs and stretch limos share the streets with trolls and ghosts, while mobile phones and Blackberries are as vital a means of communication and information as the entrails of unfortunate small animals or blood-smeared statues.

Dark, subversive, inventive, challenging, outrageous and very funny – I could string adjectives until the hippogriffs come home – *Dragons of Babel* has to be a contender for one of the best fantasy novels of the year. **Steve Jeffery**

PAPER CITIES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF URBAN FANTASY
Edited by Ekaterina Sedia
Senses Five Press (sensesfive.com), 288pp, $14.95 pb

First of all, forget about the concept of the city. It will save you from undue anxiety. Yes, most of the twenty-one stories in *Paper Cities* do take place in an urban environment, but some feel as if they've been deliberately written to escape from the confines of the remit. Either that, or they've been quietly slipped in amongst the bricks and paving stones of the built-up areas that fill most of the other stories.

After a fascinating and erudite introduction by Jess Nevins, we jump straight into a story that seems intent on ignoring everything that he was talking about. 'Andretto Walks The Kings Way' is set in a mediaeval society that is more a cluster of peasants huddled around the out side of a castle than it is a city. The circus has come to town. Unfortunately, so has the plague. The castle is sealed, but will it be enough to keep the plague out? It's all very Edgar Allen Poe. Curiously, there is even a performing dwarf at the King's court – shades of Poe's 'Hopfrog', which Roger Corman skilfully inserted into his film of *The Masque Of The Red Death* to fill it out. Unfortunately Forrest Aguirre lacks the lyricism of Poe or even Corman, and he adds nothing to the dance.

Richard Parks also fails, in 'Courting the Lady Scythe', but in a much finer fashion. Again, it's an olden setting. Jassa is in love with Lady Scythe. She is responsible for the public executions in the city and uses a contraption that resembles a horizontal guillotine. Jassa is desperate to find out what she whispers to each prisoner that seems to calm him before he dies. You should be able to see where the story is going, but it's a well-crafted journey.

Many of the stories attack similar themes in the anthology, such as black market drugs. Greg van Eekhout's narrator in 'Ghost Market' is wandering around a flea market in search of the illegal essence of ghosts, which can provide a unique experience. The vendors seem remarkably seedy, given the prices that they are charging, but never mind. Our man has a hidden agenda and is on the lookout for a particular product. It's short but effective.

In Steve Berman's 'Tearjerker', a girl protagonist, Gail, lives in a strange, post-something hotel with crones who sell the addictive tears of another resident to queues of desperate people. Gail's a bit of a kleptomaniac, which adds to the depth. No one in this story has the moral high ground, including the strange boy who is kept locked up in a room and seems to be the tear-girl's predecessor.

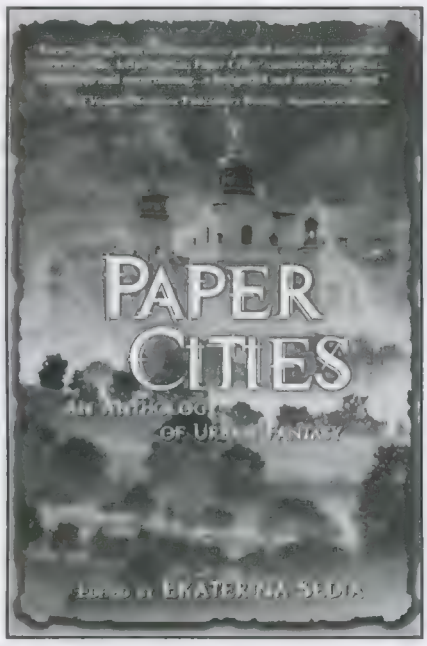
Urban environments are as much about states of mind as anything physical. Many of the stories, with their fabulous scenery and bizarre characters, are quite removed from anything that you or I would find in our own city. Mark Teppo may have a unicorn in 'The One That Got Away', but his characters are people that we run across most days of our lives. They've got humour and cynicism in equal measure and, just maybe, one or two of them are also capable of acts of greatness. Some friends meet up for a bullshit session – winner gets the round in – and one of them spins a tale about a unicorn in the park opposite the bar. He insists on his friends going after it with crossbows, and so of course they do, targeting a few of the unicorn myths along the way in what is one of the wonderfully dark rewards of the anthology.

Another contemporary cast and another highlight can be found in Kaaron Warren's 'Down To The Silver Spirits'. A group of desperate, childless couples find what might prove to be a way to induce conception. Their city is built on top of an older civilisation, and it seems that the spirits of drowned children are still trapped down there. The adult son of the woman who discovered this leads them down, and they find that it does seem to be true. There is also an air of brooding malevolence that never leaves them after this encounter. All children are strangers, but theirs seem doubly so.

There are a couple of pieces that form part of larger wholes in here, stories that reflect the personal visions of the authors. Hal Duncan waltzes with archetypes in 'The Tower of Morning's Bones', one of a four-part sequence that has already seen other sections appearing in *Interzone* and *The Solaris Book of Fantasy*. As with Duncan's *Vellum* diptych, the more one sees of it, the more one is able to appreciate the beauty and symmetry of the underlying architecture.

Paul Meloy's 'Alex and the Toyceivers' will be of particular interest to readers of *Interzone* and sister magazine *Black Static*, especially as it won't be collected in the forthcoming *Islington Crocodiles*. It's an unabashed delight, and it manages to combine a lightness of touch with real menace. It's the first chapter in a novel, but reads like a self-contained story. Strange, nightmarish toys are trying to break into Alex's house, and he has no choice but to flee to a friend's house, taking his cat with him. His wise friend, Hemog, seems to know what is going on, and is able to help. Curiously, for Meloy seems to be a resolutely urban writer, this story feels as if it takes place in a rural environment. This is one of the reasons for my warning at the start of this review – if you find yourself looking for the hidden city, you may miss the story in front of you.

It's a patchy anthology and at times it suffers from a preference for style over substance. I'll resist injecting a corny urban analogy, but I will say that there is much to reward the reader. Recommended with reservations. **Jim Steel**



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KÉTHANI
Eric Brown
Solaris Books, 294pp, £10.99 pb

Readers of *Interzone* should, by this stage, be more than familiar with the work of Eric Brown. More than twenty of his short stories have graced our pages, including two of the pieces from the work reviewed here. Although billed as a novel, *Kéthani* is in fact a collection of Brown's Kéthani stories prefaced with a fictional introduction and glued together with some newly-penned linking material. The result is tidy enough; the narrative follows an overarching thread and the whole thing coheres on a thematic level. Characters develop throughout the book, with each new chapter taking us a little further into life with the Kéthani, a bit like removing layers of wrapping in a game of pass the parcel. That said, it is still a bit of a stretch to describe the book as a novel. It feels more like a suite of interconnected stories.

Kéthani tells the story of a group of friends in a Yorkshire village, and how their lives are affected by the coming of the eponymous alien race. All over the earth, strange white towers known as onward stations appear simultaneously out of thin air. Within days reports come through that world leaders have been contacted by aliens offering the key to immortality, brought about via a simple surgical implant. From that point on, those with the device are resurrected six months after their death, to either return to their lives on earth or serve the Kéthani as ambassadors throughout the stars. As an added bonus, all of the returnees are re-socialised by the Kéthani and thus enter a third age of psycho-social maturity or increased 'humanity'.

Kéthani grips from the very first page, creating a sense of wonder that makes you feel that you have stumbled onto something monumental, something very special indeed. The crystalline prose draws you in, crisp, clean and clear as the omnipresent snow. The characters are smoothly drawn and believable and the settings brought to life so vividly that the reader can almost taste the bitter and hear the fire crackling in *The Fleece* where much of the interim action takes place.

Brown is as sparing as possible when describing the enigmatic Kéthani, keeping the focus entirely on the lives of the humans involved. One by one, the characters must each come to terms with death and rebirth in the new milieu. Each story explores the core ideas of love, loss and hope from a different perspective; from those who refuse the gift to those who end their lives in an eagerness to discover what lies beyond. The recurrence of themes and similarity of narratives can make for repetitive reading at times, like too many snapshots of the same view, but the writing is of such quality that one can easily forgive this. *Kéthani* bulges with suicide, murder, infidelity, and loss as one by one, each character is forced to consider their place in the new scheme of things. The neat trick is that it remains such a hopeful and ultimately uplifting read.
Peter Loftus

THE REVIEW OF SHORT FICTION

THE FIX

thefix-online.com

MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!
Harry Harrison
Orb, 286pp, $14.95 pb

What makes an sf novel a classic? Are we talking about a book that – when viewed over time – can be said to be of the highest literary quality when it comes to content and style? Or is it a matter of cultural osmosis – an sf classic being a book which everybody recognises and knows about even though few people have actually read it? While these definitions might do for most books I can't help but feel that – when it comes to sf – there needs to be something more.

Make Room! Make Room! – American author Harry Harrison's surprisingly serious and impassioned novel about overpopulation – was first published in 1966, at a time when the number of humans on planet Earth was estimated to be a mere 3.4 billion. If nothing else there is a certain irony in the book being republished now, a mere 42 years later, when the most recent estimate of humanity is near enough double that – more than 6.7 billion souls.

There's no doubting that *Make Room! Make Room!* is an extremely well written novel, a surprisingly serious thriller from an author best known for his humorous novels. It presents the reader with an extremely believable and highly detailed projection of life in a 1999 New York filled to the brim with 35 million people. That the actual New York of today (nine years after the novel is supposedly set) is still only home to around 18.6 million people is hardly relevant – sf's role as grim soothsayer has been frequently overvalued.

And yet there is much in Harrison's novel that retains a very real relevance to the world we live in today. Following the increasingly soul-destroying daily life of police detective Andy Rusch, Harrison's vision takes in exhausted natural resources, humanity's destruction of the environment and the increasing social problems of humans living in increasingly overcrowded conditions.

This is not so much prediction of what might actually happen as a stunning statement of what it would be like to live in such a world. Harrison confidently moves from one narrative character to the next, skilfully filling in the details of his increasingly uncomfortable world by using characters from many different levels of this society's social structures – literally from the gutter right up to the highest levels of the Empire State Building. These are distinctive, rounded and – despite what they may have done – remain living, breathing individuals.

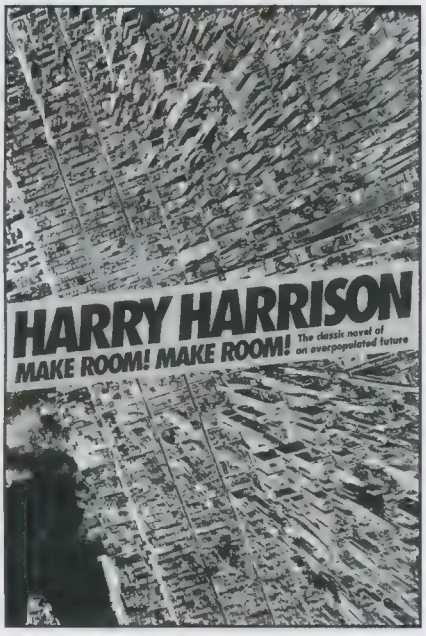


photograph courtesy of Szymon Sokol

Harry Harrison at the World Science Fiction Convention, Glasgow 2005

Admittedly, for a writer famed for the comedic touch of *The Stainless Steel Rat*, *Bill the Galactic Hero* and such conceits as *The Technicolor Time Machine* and *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!*, Harrison's writing here is unusually bleak. Of course a crime-ridden New York increasingly affected by societal breakdown was a common enough subject for late 60s fiction and non-fiction, but this remains an extremely measured portrayal of the city. Indeed, it's only towards the end when it could be said that Harrison's polemical edge gets the better of him, with the neighbourly character of Sol – an 'oldie' – becoming almost a ranting mouthpiece on the evils of denying artificial forms of birth control as a route towards population control.

"We've got too many people in the world," Sol shouts out towards the close of the novel, "and something has to be done about it. But doing something means that people must change, make an effort, use their minds, which is what most people do not like to do." Despite the increased popularity and acceptance of green issues, that could equally be said of most people today when it comes to the big environmental issues of the day – after all,



too many of us are happy to recycle our newspapers and yet sill want to be able to fly away on holiday with a minimum of fuss.

It's difficult to describe *Make Room! Make Room!* as an optimistic read – characters die, or essentially get pissed upon from on high, and the world in which the rest live is hardly one to encourage a sense of community. But undoubtedly, this is a novel addressing issues that – important in 1966 – remain relevant and of real interest to modern readers. And that is what makes a genuine sf classic. **Paul F. Cockburn**

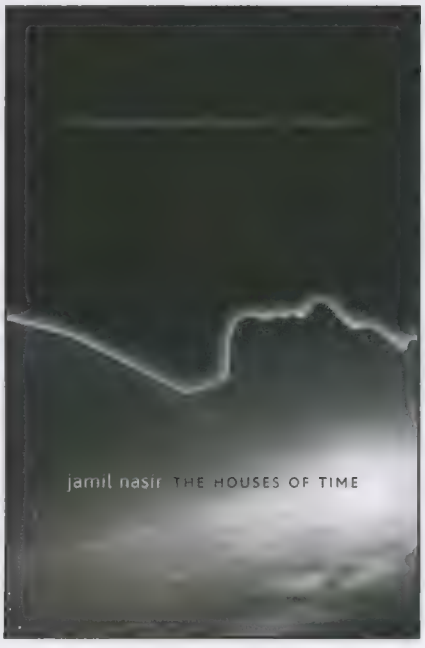
THE HOUSES OF TIME
Jamil Nasir
Tor, 304pp $24.95 hb

It's only too common to see science fiction described as a 'literature of ideas', as though all other forms of literature are somehow devoid of them. What such commentators are presumably groping towards is some sort of notion that ideas are foregrounded in sf in a way they aren't in other kinds of literature. Or, and I suspect that this is really at the heart of the comment, they mean that ideas rather than people drive the plots of sf novels. Sometimes this is true, but a good science fiction story cannot simply rely on a decent idea to get it through. There has to be something more. What shape that 'more' takes is up to the author, of course, but it has to be present for a novel to become something other than an elaborate cognitive doodle placed in front of the reader, some sort of mental amuse-gueule that will tease the intellect without ever satisfying it. Which brings me to Jamil Nasir's *The Houses of Time*.

As the novel opens, David Grant is travelling in his dreams, moving into the past, visiting places he knew when he was young. One might almost be heading into the territory of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time-Traveller's Wife*. Except that David Grant is not falling almost uncontrollably through time. In fact, he is an experienced lucid dreamer who is undergoing some form of training with the Trans Humanist Institute, in an attempt to give greater meaning to his life.

Learning to dream lucidly might not seem to be an obvious road to greater self-enlightenment, but it is not difficult to see why Grant might suppose it would be. His whole life is focused on control. He is, as he admits, a product of 'discipline and self-realization'. He is a self-made man, shaped by training seminars and self-help guides. A successful lawyer, with all the usual trappings of a wealthy lifestyle, attractive to women, careless of emotional attachment, Grant is as superficial and unpleasant as such a carefully constructed CV would imply. He is also the classic, buttoned-up, middle-aged professional man, ripe for an experience that will break down his emotional restraints and either lead him to greater fulfilment or utter humiliation.

Were it not for the existence of the THI and the presence of lucid dreaming, one might be in any old novel about a male mid-life crisis. However, David Grant is not your average lucid dreamer; not only



"Were it not for the existence of the THI and the presence of lucid dreaming, one might be in any old novel about a male mid-life crisis. However, David Grant is not your average lucid dreamer; not only can he control his dreams while asleep but he can travel between 'dream-places' while awake"

can he control his dreams while asleep but he can travel between 'dream-places' while awake. In effect, he has the ability to move between parallel worlds, while awake. It is this skill that interests the THI and its bizarre director, Dr Thotmoses. The THI is in fact a front for the Caucasus Synod Western Orthodox Church, which needs to find people like Grant to go and talk to God on their behalf. They have great hopes for Grant's success.

So far, so good. The narrative has possibilities, even if, I have to admit, the presence of Dr Thotmoses and the Caucasus Synod has caused my capacity for disbelief to sag alarmingly floorwards. It comes as a disappointment, then, to find that Jamil Nasir is so caught up with the notion of being able to move between these parallel worlds that he has to work out the concept to what feels like the *n*th degree, without substantially moving the narrative forward. The reader is effectively trapped in Grant's solipsism, and spends a considerable amount of time cycling through several worlds as Grant experiments with his own ability to travel, and tries to come to terms with what is happening to him.

To an extent, I sympathise with Nasir's absorption in these worlds. His descriptions of Grant's lives in these different world are at times lyrical. He has a wonderful ability to evoke the 'feel' of small-town life, as it exists in adult memories of childhood: the play of light in the trees, the look of a path, the people, the houses and gardens. When he returns to the student David hitchhiking through rural North America, he perfectly catches that feeling of life unrolling without a need for more than that moment to exist. The whole thing falls apart when Nasir returns the reader to what seems to be Grant's 'home world', one in which he is now a paraplegic, trapped in a monstrous care home where the routine relies on relentless drugs and violence.

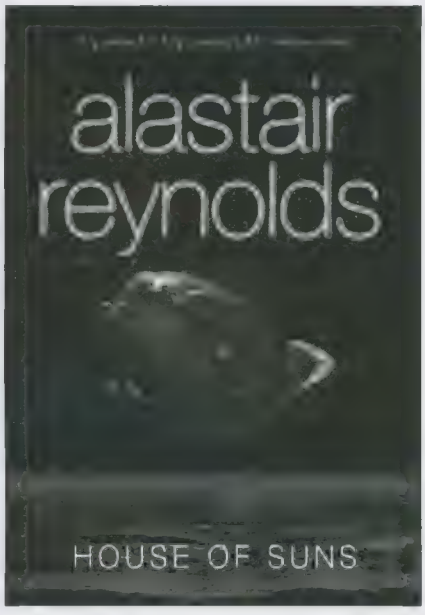
And round the reader goes again, trying to construct some sort of narrative from the fragments. Are we supposed to see the travelling as a response to Grant's being trapped in a useless body? No, because I don't think that's where the story started. In which case, should we be concerned about time paradoxes? No, Grant (and by implication Nasir) has that one tidied away to the extent of blatantly playing with it on the page, just to prove the matter.

One might endeavour to draw a moral from the fact that Grant has been set up by Kat, the original of the beautiful 'surfer girl', the holy nun-whore who is a honey-trap agent for the THI, using Grant just as ruthlessly as he uses her. Religion is what drives her in the same way as Grant is driven by a desperate need for novelty. Yet, the Caucasus Synod Western Orthodox Church is, for me, one of the least plausible elements of this novel; its biological differences, its social exclusivity, none of this rings true. It sits undigested in the narrative to provide a reason for Grant to come into his powers and then exercise them.

At the end of it all, we're left with some ideas: a mysterious church that needs talented world-hoppers to intercede with its version of god, a well-developed theory of parallel worlds that neatly ties up all the usual paradoxes, and an overwhelming sense of 'is that it?' left lingering on the intellectual palate. I want to like this novel; it has ideas that intrigue me, it has passages of exquisite description, and a protagonist who, while he is thoroughly unlikeable, is somehow touching in his stumbling efforts to cope. Yet, I remain disappointed because this novel cannot transcend those ideas and transform them into something more.
Maureen Kincaid Speller

REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY DAVID MATHEW





ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

It is not so much that the subjects at the heart of Alastair Reynolds' new novel *House of Suns* (Gollancz hb, 480pp, £18.99) are breathtakingly distant and vast in scope; it is more the fact that the author has taken some familiar set-ups, placed them in an enormous desert somewhere, and allowed a low and powerful sun to create a long, warped and ugly shadow of shifting shapes. The novel is the shadow we observe.

For despite the scale of the plot – where time is often measured in years by the factor of a million, where distance is almost taken for granted (much like Douglas Adams' old assertion that space is big), and where even the notion of moving the position of stars is as plausible as that of shifting caravans – what we have in *House of Suns*, at its heart, is a family comedy and a family melodrama: the build-up to a reunion at which we know the chickens will come home to roost. The compulsory reunion, in fact, is where we start this novel's particular journey.

Abigail Gentian has dissected herself into a thousand clones ('scatterlings') and their collective role in life is to explore galaxies in search of knowledge, experience and memory (above all, perhaps, memory). The idea is to reconvene and share what they have learned at reunions through time – the logical next step on from Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Eliot's *The Family Reunion,* one might think – but one of the many problems that Abigail is to encounter is that two of her scatterlings are going to be late to the party. And not fashionably late, either: *late* late. It's a shame that protocol prevents any direct quotation from the pages of a proof, because there is plenty to admire in Reynolds' no-nonsense prose, and wit is everywhere: one of said slugabeds does not so much put things off for a day or two as for a million years at a time. At least, on this occasion, the two of them are only dawdling by a couple of decades each…

Not that this is the extent of the worries. Scatterlings shouldn't fall in love with one another (further connections, we could argue, with some of the other tales of our Ancient Greek forefathers); and a forgetful robot who might forgive the latter misdemeanour would like to know what he was involved in that caused him to lose his memory. And the answers had better arrive quickly: the Gentian family line is at stake, and time is pressing.

What swiftly becomes clear is that Reynolds has written a hugely entertaining extrapolation of contemporary mores: a far-flung comedy of manners, with fascinating precedents. The challenging concept of the Stardam aside, this is warm-hearted science fiction, with big ideas that are easy to follow, and examinations of the sides of family life that we often wish would not take up so much *time and space. House of Suns* might well be the author's most human novel to date.

Where did the idea for *House of Suns* come from?

I've always enjoyed very far-future SF novels, so it was on the cards that I'd write one at some point. The genesis of this particular book was 'Thousandth Night', a novella I was commissioned to write a few years ago, speculating on life a million years from now (although my story was cheekily set two million years in the future). After the dust had died down, I found that there was more I wanted to do with that future and set of characters. A chance email from a fan asking whether I'd ever considered a sequel to 'Thousandth Night' was the final push that got me working on the novel.

How long did it take to write and were there any particular difficulties?

I started the book in mid April of 2007 and finished it – barring another draft and the usual round of editorial rewrites – in late October. I hit the ground running, aiming to write 100,000 words by the end of May. That was hard, but it got me through the pain barrier early on and the rest of the book – while not exactly a breeze – didn't give me too many sleepless nights. I always had a clear idea where I was going with the story, aiming for the final scene. If there was one particular difficulty, it was in maintaining the alternating viewpoint structure throughout the book, while also threading in the 'flashback' scenes

at the start of each section. I did slip up a few times and had to go back and rejig large chunks of the book to preserve the structure.

If readers were able to take only one lesson – or one meaning – from the book, what would you hope it would be?
I suppose the book is fundamentally about tolerance and forgiveness. On a science fictional level, it's yet another attempt by me to get across how wonderfully and frighteningly big the universe is, and how ephemeral we are set against the timescales of stars and the galaxy. On the other hand, we may be the only things in the universe with a conscience.

Do you think living in a different country from your country of birth has made a significant difference to your writing? If so, in what ways?
I've always been quite Eurocentric in my thinking, so it's difficult to say. In any case, after sixteen years in the Netherlands, I've just returned to Wales. It'll be interesting to see whether my time abroad begins to seep out into my fiction now. It might take a while – my last story in *Interzone* ['The Sledge-maker's Daughter', issue 209] was set in Newcastle, a place I haven't lived in for twenty years. I suspect you have to leave a place before you can start to process it through fiction.

As this interview will appear in our Mundane-SF issue, I'd like to ask your opinion of the Mundane movement.
I agree wholeheartedly that SF needs to take a long, hard look at itself every now and again. Tropes do become overused, and there's no doubt that a degree of wish-fulfilment fantasizing can begin to creep in. One of the several places where I part company with Ryman *et al* is in the notion that SF needs a manifesto to kickstart what is essentially an on-going, self-critical process – something that's been happening since the genre's remotest origins. In characterising what's wrong or deficient about SF now, they also set up some strawman figures that have little to do with much of the SF I've been reading in the last twenty or thirty years.

The Mundanes tell us that we mustn't speculate about interstellar travel, because a) it's unlikely, b) it's liable to lead to wish fulfilment about a universe abundant with Earthlike worlds. Quite apart from the fact that there is serious ongoing speculation about methods of interstellar travel, and even respected physics journals still discuss the possibility of superluminal communication, I'm at a loss as to how *a* is supposed to lead to *b*. Science is teaching us amazing new things about our place in the cosmos, about real extrasolar planets and real astrochemistry. I see this reflected in books and stories by the likes of Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter, Robert Reed, Greg Egan, Greg Benford and others. Not a lot of wish fulfilment going on there – more a case of finding a fictional framework in which to play with some of the head-spinning ideas in exobiology and cosmology now being seriously debated. Isn't that one of the things that SF is for? And isn't it a trifle patronising to characterise any SF that does dares to look beyond our solar system – or even Earth – as stemming from an "adolescent desire to run away"? If all the Mundanes did was say we need a bit more of a certain type of SF, I'd be right behind them. But the strawman posturing and the psychobabble rhetoric do them no favours.

What are you working on at the moment?
I've just completed 'Troika', a novella about first contact with an inscrutable alien artefact. That'll appear in Jonathan Strahan's forthcoming anthology for the Science Fiction Book Club, *Godlike Machines*. With that off the table, I'm now gearing up to start the new novel. Right now there isn't much I can say about that, since it's all a bit nebulous and unformed. ✡

BSFA 50th ANNIVERSARY SHORT STORY COMPETITION

FOR WRITERS FROM THE UK & IRELAND

FIRST PRIZE £500

To celebrate 50 years of the BSFA's promotion of British science fiction, we are pleased to announce our 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition.

The competition is open to any writer resident in the UK or Ireland. The maximum length of stories is 8,000 words. The stories must be science fiction, but we're willing to take a broad definition of what that means. All entries must be accompanied by a £10 entry fee.

The winner will receive a cash prize of £500, the shortlisted runners up will receive £50, and the winning and shortlisted entries will be published in a special issue of FOCUS the BSFA's magazine for writers. The closing date for entries is midnight on Friday 5 September 2008. The winner will be announced at the BSFA 50th Anniversary Birthday Party, 26 November 2008.

For all the rules, and details on how to enter, visit:
www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa/website/competition.aspx

Judges
Justina Robson, Stephen Baxter & Alastair Reynolds

Time was when a book or a film was just itself, a thing telling a story, and going from one to the other was a comparatively simple matter of retelling the story in a different kind of thing. But that was then. Nowadays what you license is a brand, a mythos, a set of characters, an object of fandom, and what gets copyrighted isn't the plot but the names, the iconography, the elements of an extensible universe. In a world that consumers will want to revisit (ideally, paying again for the privilege), actual storyline is often less important than the potential to generate immersive or interactive material, with a major consideration in acquisitions for film being the reducibility of the universe's essential narrative armature to a simplified plot space that can be navigated in the form of a spinoff game, without which few large films will even get out the budgetary gate. In this new poetics of the franchise, the texture of the world is more valuable than its narrative contents, and what happens to the characters in their universe is often fairly secondary to other intellectual-property applications. Children's series are especially sought after, not simply because one of them has been staggeringly successful, but because it's quite hard to lose a lot of money in the process, short of managing to alienate both old fans *and* new audience by doing a *Dark is Rising* number on the material. Even so, this season marks a new tidemark: no fewer than three attempts to forge big new film brands from juvenile book franchises, with three entirely different kinds of mixed success.

The Spiderwick Chronicles



Strikingly, the one that comes out best is the one that's boldly opted to turn a complex media-rich series into a single self-contained work of narrative film. **The Spiderwick Chronicles** comes from the elaborate and much-emulated book franchise created by illustrator Tony DiTerlizzi and the excellent young-adult faerie novelist Holly Black. The series began life as a Snicketesque closed series of five illustrated novellas in designer hardcover, then branched out into glossy non-narrative amplifications of the mythology in a series of large-format visual companions, and now a sequel series *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles* whose second volume is due later in the year. It's a franchise that quite openly sets out to make a virtue rather than an impediment of the fact that its mythology is larger, and on the whole more effective, than its actual plot – which has nine-year-old Jared Grace, his twin brother Simon, and thirteen-year-old sister Mallory move upstate after a messy parental separation to their great-grandfather Arthur Spiderwick's old dark house, where they discover things in the walls and woods and Arthur's manuscript *Field Guide to the Fantastical World around You* to unlock its secrets.

The most imaginatively powerful moment in the books comes at the end of the first adventure when the kids realise the sheer vastness of the faerie otherworld documented in Arthur's *Guide*. But subsequent instalments never really deliver on the promise of encyclopaedic immensity and awe, settling instead into a fairly consistent boilerplate narrative in which one or more family members are abducted by a particular faerie species whose distinctive nature is then exploited by Jared in outwitting it. Starting with the third volume, a loose connecting thread gradually emerges in the Sauronic figure of the ogre Mulgarath, who seeks the *Guide* for himself to harness its secrets and conquer the human world; but when the *Guide* itself was published as the first of the increasingly lavish spinoff volumes, it became hard to see why Mulgarath should have been particularly bothered. DiTerlizzi and Black's most recent book *The Chronicles of Spiderwick* is a gorgeous lift-the-flaps scrapbook blurbed as "an interactive look at the world of Spiderwick," and there's no denying that this kind of thing is a fantastic vehicle for DiTerlizzi's craft and for Black's stamp-collecting passion for faerie lore. My own ten-year-old was hooked by the handbooks first, the film very much second ("the scariest thing I've ever seen"), and the novels a belated third. But it's hard not to feel that Black, an absolutely terrific writer of contemporary adolescent characters and unsettling faerie world-slippages, is rather wasted on this kind of exercise when she could be doing what she does best, writing novels in which things actually happen.

And what makes the *Spiderwick* film interesting against this background is its decision to go against the grain of current movie practice and condense the entire five-book series, as well as much of the material in the published *Guide*, into a single film – collapsing the loose episodic structure from its original span of months into a few frenetic days, bringing Mulgarath in early, and reining in the exploratory sallies into the other world in favour of a film-long siege of the Spiderwick mansion itself, in what is in effect a 12A *Assault on Precinct 13* with goblins. The fourth book has been omitted entirely, and all excursions into school and other settings



Jumper

have been ruthlessly cut – creating a bit of a challenge for the visit to crazy Aunt Lucinda in vol. 3, managed here by a frenzied new set piece of tunnel-dash and troll pursuit.

On its own terms, though, it works well enough. DiTerlizzi and Black were closely involved in the production, which captures the visual style fabulously, and many moments do improve on the books, with the classy and very unHollywood twist in the final volume set up early on by an ingenious network of phone messages and broken secrets that leave you glumly certain how the climax will play out, only for it to be knocked for six when the kids' absent father is finally introduced. The kids have been rather drastically upcast; Sarah Bolger was fifteen at time of shooting and Freddie Highmore only a year behind, though he plays younger quite effectively. But given that children's books routinely present nine-year-olds thinking and behaving with the sensibility of teens, the actual dynamics of the characters and their relationship survive fairly intact – with the script fingerprints of John Sayles particularly evident in the sharply-written domestic scenes, which could have been awful. Rising national treasure Highmore is on awesome form as utterly-unlike identical twins, his two-headed closeups a wonder to watch – though his siblings' parts have been pruned to make room, to the loss of some of the effective family teamwork in the novels – and the absence of a sequel has freed Highmore up for a crowded slate of upcoming franchise adaptations, which now includes *Awful End* as well as the rest of the Minimoys and Dark Materials trilogies. It's a lot of investment to bank before his voice breaks.

Further up the age-range, Doug Liman's **Jumper** is optimistically conceived as the first of a projected trilogy based on Steven Gould's effective Heinleinesque adventures of teleporting teens. The trilogy now seems fairly unlikely to materialise, following a less bouncy box-office performance from *Jumper* than its makers had hoped. Even so, as a preposterous velcro-wigged Samuel L. Jackson intones, "There are *always* consequences." In a significant milestone for book/film interaction, Gould, who had already tried to franchise up the brand with his 2004 sequel *Reflex*, has since gritted teeth and written a third novel, *Jumper: Griffin's Story*, in which he grudgingly revises his own mythos for compatibility with the significantly sillier movie version, and taken his title (though mercifully none of his plot) from the feeble tie-in game centred on Jamie Bell's character – who was actually created by David Goyer during his stint on the script, so that the book's copyright page has gallingly to include an acknowledgment of Regency Pictures' ownership of its hero. There's some justice in the fact that Gould's novel version of the Goyer-Liman mythos turns out to work rather well in all the ways that the actual film doesn't, thanks in large part to a return to juvenile leads and first-person storytelling that keeps the new antagonists largely out of frame and their motives wisely unconfronted.

Certainly there's precious little left of the books in the film. Gould's original 1992 novel was about a kid who teleports out of an abusive

relationship with his dad and into a rambling, largely plotless series of life adventures before a lurching shift of direction and pace in the final third embarks him on an unexpected career in freelance counterterrorism. The film version starts from the same point, but jaunts off early on into a completely different setup, eight years down the line, in which an older David finds himself one of a worldwide family of jumpers who have been hunted to extermination down the centuries by a fanatical order of "paladins" on the grounds that "You are an abomination. Only God should have the power to be in all places at all times." This hugely silly idea, which culminates in a completely nonsensical final twist, is the undoing of most of what was good about the books. Admittedly the original novel narrowly predated a number of things that would make it difficult to film in quite that form today: the first Gulf War, the distance-abolishing ubiquity of internet and mobile telephony, even the ascendancy of the superhero movie. But Gould's two adolescent novels (*Reflex* is a bit different, being set ten years on with a split lead and told in third person) explore fairly specific teenage male issues of escape and moral self-education, to which it's quite important that their heroes are parentless adolescents, alone of their kind, effectively unlimited in their power, and left to find their own moral narrative rather than having one imposed on them by trenchcoated exterminators with designer taser cannons and a whole conspiracy theory of history behind them. ("The inquisition, witch-hunts: that was them." Perhaps they just used cattle-prods.)

The problem here is that Liman and his writers seem incapable of freeing themselves from the mighty Marvel mindset when it comes to imagining what teenage males with superpowers would actually do in the real world, and actually see it as a problem with the books that they have no villains and no vulnerabilities beyond the normal human ones that are more than enough for most. Gould's Davey and Griffin pointedly *don't* see their lives as a superhero comic, and indeed begin their moral homeschooling by robbing banks themselves rather than cleaning up the streets. But the *Jumper* script has been through the hard drives of Marvel movie veterans Goyer and Simon Kinberg, and the superhero nudge-jokes are like a fist in the ribs. (When Hayden Christensen invites Bell to join forces, it's "You read *Marvel Team-Up*: two superheroes joining forces for a limited run.") Yet Gould went to some trouble to explore the numerous reasons why the cosy and ubiquitous superhero model wouldn't work for real-world teens. As the novels have uncomfortably to acknowledge from time to time, *Jumper*'s wish-fulfilment kick is actually about being a drug dealer, and what larks it would be to have the lifestyle with none of the unfortunate ethical baggage. Unfortunately, the decision to make the film about twentysomethings rather than teens turns the hero from a troubled but sympathetic survivor to a thoroughly unlovable narcissist who has managed to spend eight years as a social parasite failing to develop personally or morally in any way. To be sure, it's all a lavish celebration of film's power to jump travel-nervous Americans to instant gratification at second-unit-porn destinations worldwide without ever leaving their seat: a Méliès for the millennium where the blink of an edit can shift your fight scene from Ann Arbor in winter to a copter shot of Gizeh without missing a karate kick. But that makes it all the more unforgivable to allow the trailer to appear to promise an episode (the jump into orbit) significantly more thrilling than anything in the actual film.

Down in the playpen, **Dr Seuss's Horton Hears a Who!** is another would-be franchise logroller, seeking to snare for Fox's animation arm the lucrative Seuss account fumbled by Universal in its lamentable live-action versions at the start of the decade. The one brilliant sequence in *The Cat in the Hat* was the journey through the portal into full-on Seussworld, and visually, at least, this all-cg realisation is a remarkable further step beyond, even if getting those exquisitely plastiform Seussian 2D bodies to wobble and bounce in convincing compliance with the laws of cartoon gravity has clearly given more

Dr Seuss's Horton Hears A Who!





The Orphanage

trouble than they've quite been able to surmount. Regrettably one thing that hasn't changed is that nobody in Hollywood, no matter how highly paid, seems able to produce remotely scannable Seussian verse; *Horton* doesn't start out as badly as *The Grinch*, whose opening attempt at Seussian tetrameter is still a benchmark achievement in tin-eared prosody, but it's not long before we're being asked to accept monstrosities like "While Horton came clean about the speck that he'd found / And how he'd saved it when it nearly drowned."

Seuss's 1954 sequel to *Horton Hatches the Egg* and prequel to *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has more incident and more characters than most Seuss, and was certainly the right choice of Horton story (Blue Sky have optioned both) to push out of the nest first. But the Dr's fable of his elephant hero hearing a cry for help from a micro-universe on a speck of dust, and his battle to convince a sceptical Jungle of Nool that there's anything there to save, still only musters about ten minutes' worth of actual plot, which has yet again had to be padded out for film with frenetic set pieces, interminable dialogue interscenes of nowhere-going character business, and dead-in-the-water gag lines ("I love the smell of bananas in the morning", &c.) – though there's one brilliant throwaway character in demented fluffball Katie, in whose own secondary world "everyone's a pony, and they all eat rainbows and poop butterflies." Much of the expansion is at the Whoville end of the story, where Horton's struggle for credence is now mirrored in the Mayor's attempts to convince the citizens of a sceptical secular democracy that their world is indeed a speck on a flower in the trunk of a giant elephant in the sky. As in the 2000 Broadway version *Seussical*, the Jo-Jo who goes "Yopp!" is now the Mayor's son, leading to some tiresomely by-numbers intra-familial male healing, not to mention a rather shocking sidelining of Jo-Jo's 96 sisters. ("Hey!" they complain, with complete justice: "Why does he get more time?")

In principle it's a neat conceit that the Whoville citizenry should have the same trouble believing in Horton as the junglefolk have believing in the Whos. But the asymmetry between macroscopic Horton and the microscopic Whos was fundamental to Seuss's liberal message that the very big should recognise the rights of the imperceptibly little, and the inversion of this relationship has turned the Whos' own predicament into something uncomfortably different: the need for faith in a force larger than ourselves, whether we choose to call it God, Gaia, or a giant cartoon elephant in the sky. It's a shift in message that would surely have dismayed Seuss himself, who lived to deplore the pro-life lobby's appropriation of Horton's civil-rights slogan "A person's a person, no matter how small." In the event, the film version nervously tries to offer reassurance to all interest groups and none, giving advocates of Darwin and Design alike permission to feel smug in the truth of the invisible. "If you can't see it or hear it or feel it," says the sour kangaroo, "then it doesn't exist … Are we going to let troublemakers like Horton poison the minds of our children?" But it's actually a trickier call than the film admits, given that the largest class of entities that can't be seen, heard, or felt is those that really *don't* exist.

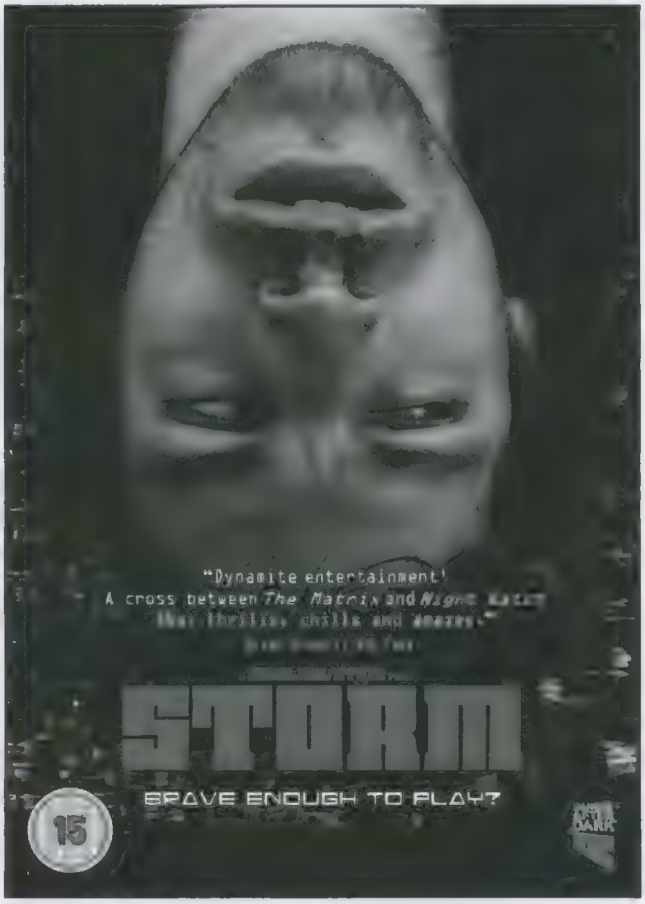
Horton's dilemma is echoed in Spanish spookflick **The Orphanage**'s borderline nonsensical catchphrase "Seeing is not believing; it's the other way around." Has sensitive Simón really been abducted by the ghosts of his mother's former playmates as part of a grisly game, or is her own descent into paranormal explanation a psychological smokescreen for something more mundanely unimaginable? It comes as no surprise that the two levels of the film's reality turn out to converge at the climax, though the actual revelation is both neat and effective, and comes just at the moment when you're wondering whatever became of that evocative clue that was dropped an hour back. Otherwise, much of the plotting is fairly wobbly, with some awkward jumps in time, cast, and story direction, and a series of pretty outrageous plot suggestions: "Let's have a *creepy mask party* to welcome all the special kids to the orphanage!" "Will you allow Geraldine Chaplin to prowl unsettlingly around your house bumping into unseen things?" "Why not leave me, your suicidally depressed wife, alone in this haunted orphanage for two days to *say goodbye*?" But it's still a vintage slice of the new Catholic ghost movie most vividly represented by del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* and Almenábar's *The Others*, and though it was actually written before either, all the tickboxes are there: childhood fantasy and adult reality, death and old dark houses, forgotten crimes and survivor guilt, and an ending that leaves us for better or worse in the heart of the labyrinth. UK viewers will particularly appreciate the echoes of tabloid-friendly urban horrors of child abduction and bricked-over remains of ghastly decades-old abuses to which the social services have remained mysteriously indifferent. (*The Others* was set in Jersey. Don't tell me that's concidence. La, la, la, can't hear you.) Most strikingly, it's essentially the same story as *Spiderwick* – only now replayed from the mother's perspective, and with a child in a headsack in place of the ogre Nick Nolte. "Two vastly different worlds," muses Horton in a moment of wonder, "yet somehow we've managed to make contact." Or maybe their worlds are just closer than you'd think. **Nick Lowe**

Stephen Tolkin's **Daybreak** (aka *Bloodstream*, 1993) demonstrates how the socio-political resistance movement in a futuristic dystopia usually depends on individuals' strength of character, pursuing a course of outlawed action in response to a personal grievance against a totalitarian state, or is prompted by an unquiet conscience in the wake of discovering injustice or tragedy. Firstly, however, this TV movie is a story of love among the ruins. Blue (Moira Kelly) meets Torch (Cuba Gooding Jr). Blue loses Torch, after gross misfortune. Blue finds Torch, again, but chance and circumstances separate them permanently, leaving the spirited Blue carrying a torch for him, while taking over Torch's management of a resistance cell. Bleak and gritty by design, with frequently raw emotional values, there's never a dull moment in this grim drama, for all its somewhat hackneyed plotting and routine heroism. Martha Plimpton is great as Blue's well-intentioned but ultimately disloyal best friend, while Omar Epps turns in a fine performance as the creepily ambitious yet misguidedly streetwise leader of a homeland security guard unit.

With rudimentary plotted actioner **Alien Siege** (2005), the Sci-Fi Channel furthers their campaign of insulting genre fans' intelligence. The directorial debut for visual effects' supervisor Robert Stadd, it showcases more cheapo Bulgarian location work.

Deep-space race, the Kulku, demand all the blood from eight million humans to help them find a cure for a mysterious viral disease. To avert war-of-the-worlds hostilities, Earth's governments organise death lotteries, to roundup sacrificial victims. Roswell scientist Stephen Chase (Brad Johnson, *The Rocketeer*) defies US military authority (represented here by B-movie veteran Carl Weathers), sides with a luckless resistance that's inevitably led by plucky militia heroine Blair (Lilas Lane), and stages a mission to rescue his only daughter Heather (Erin Ross) from – ominous zing tone – the evil clutches of vile alien nazis! Okay, who green-lit such an obviously laughable travesty? This is derivative twaddle, that scores home entertainment points only when viewed as safely predictable nonsense, shifted toward funny-zone tolerability by subduing your prized critical faculties under alcoholic influence. Nay, strike that. It's really not worth risking a hangover. Just watch *Mars Attacks* again, because compared to this undeveloped phoney rubbish, Tim Burton's sci-fi parody makes (Ack!) perfect sense.

"You're refuting documented news articles, with your dreams?" Based on his 'original' (it says here) novel, Bennett Davlin's **Memory** (2006) is yet another psychic thriller about a serial killer. Taylor Briggs (Billy Zane, *Alien Agent*) is ahead in Alzheimer's research, which, during a Brazilian medical convention, leads him to consult on the case of a poisoning victim's stash of psychedelic 'sacred powder' – used in rainforest shaman rites, "to see through the eyes of their ancestors." Exposure to this mystic's drug results in overpowering hallucinations, reportedly linked to the pineal gland and DMT (see Rick Strassman's *Spirit Molecule* text), but how does Taylor get visions of apparent events that occurred before his birth? What begins as a feeble replay of Ken Russell's brilliant *Altered States* (1980), eventually becomes a simplified variation of Rockne O'Bannon's *Fear* (1990), when haunted Taylor teams with artist Stephanie (Tricia Helfer, *BSG*), to investigate 1970s' infanticides, and uncover the identity of a masked kidnapper and murderer – a spectral figure observed in Taylor's immersive dream-states. The film's cool theatricality and visual style are vaguely reminiscent of Argento's oeuvre, but without the copious bloodletting, while



blackout episodes recall the seamless psychic nightmares of Cronenberg's superior *Dead Zone* (1983). Dennis Hopper and Ann-Margret both serve this slowly unfolding drama well, as supporting characters with pivotal or amusing roles to play, and Terry Chen is terrific as Taylor's sceptical confidante Dr Chang, but the 'amnesiac adoptee' revelations are too easily predictable, and the epilogue's twist is quite blatantly telegraphed by one of Steph's paintings.

Swedish sci-fi horror **Storm** (2005) marks the feature-length debut of writer and co-director Måns Mårlind. Donny 'DD' Davidson (Eric Ericson) is a loner if not a loser, until he meets feisty redhead Lova (Eva Rose), who's being hunted by a goon squad. DD is given a locked box but not a key to open it. A nameless villain (Jonas Karlsson) is after the box, and he manages to capture and torture Lova, and DD is lured into a trap. Meanwhile, flashbacks replay acts of cruelty from DD's past, comicbook action scenes make viewers question what's real and what's a product of DD's imagination, and DD becomes a reluctant hero, at least in his dream life. Basically inspired by *The Matrix*, the contrived and quirky plotline becomes compelling nonetheless, and this offbeat mix of cinematic fantasy and edgy social realism presents a tough and grainy variation on shiny Hollywood-gloss cyberpunk realms. Although it blunders through a virtual wasteland of narrative dead-ends and blind alleyways, to arrive at its moot point ending (the abrupt wake-up-call for DD, that's inevitable, in retrospect), there are plenty of engaging philosophical musings and throwaway satirical

asides, pasted into some of the intentionally confusing phildickian subgenre moments to make this noticeably eccentric drama worth tracking down.

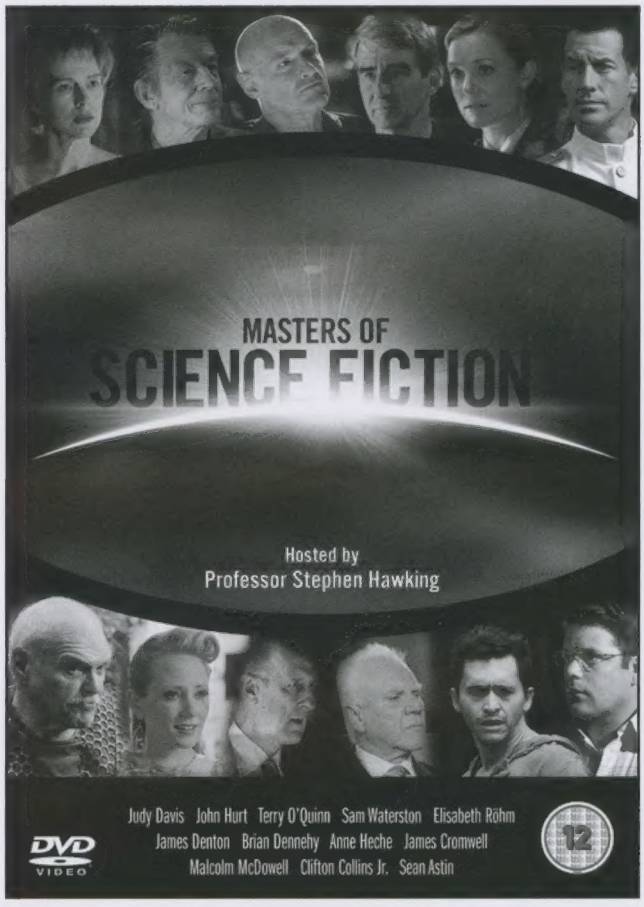
The epic Korean fantasy **Dragon Wars** (aka *D-War*, 2007) fuses magic and folklore with spectacular Tolkien-scale warfare and the urban carnage of monster movies like *Godzilla*. It's a dose of pure cinematic fun, with non-stop and wall-to-wall action that means there is almost no time for character development, or even three-dimensional characters – they're archetypes (wise mentor, brave hero, tragic mystery girl) or plain stereotypes, but if you enjoy the haphazard plotting, cut-price visual effects work and unconventional Asian cultural appeal of hectically fast-paced adventures, such as *Zu Warriors*, this wryly eclectic blend of genre formulas should keep you amused. News reporter Ethan (Jason Behr, *Roswell*) investigates a puzzling accidental discovery in LA, is strangely drawn to 'chosen one' Sarah (Amanda Brooks, in her first starring role), and the couple soon find themselves pursued by a gigantic evil serpent capable of eating five elephants at once. Based on Korean mythology about mega snakes that might transform into good or very bad dragons, this defies logic or common sense in the manner of a *King Kong*-sized fairy tale for the X-box generation. It pits military helicopters against fabulous monsters and time-travelling 'medieval' armies, while it freely borrows notions from *Star Wars*. Other points of interest for curious viewers, include Elizabeth Peña among the US federal agents, old hand Robert Forster doing what he can with his thankless exposition speech, and so much rapidly-edited CGI in all those city-wrecking sequences that Michael Bay's overrated *Transformers* (2007) seems ridiculously slow-moving in comparison. Director Hyung-rae Shim previously made *Reptilian* (aka *Yonggary*, 1999), which is certainly worth a look if you favour cartoonishly surreal action movies composed from likeably preposterous nonsense.

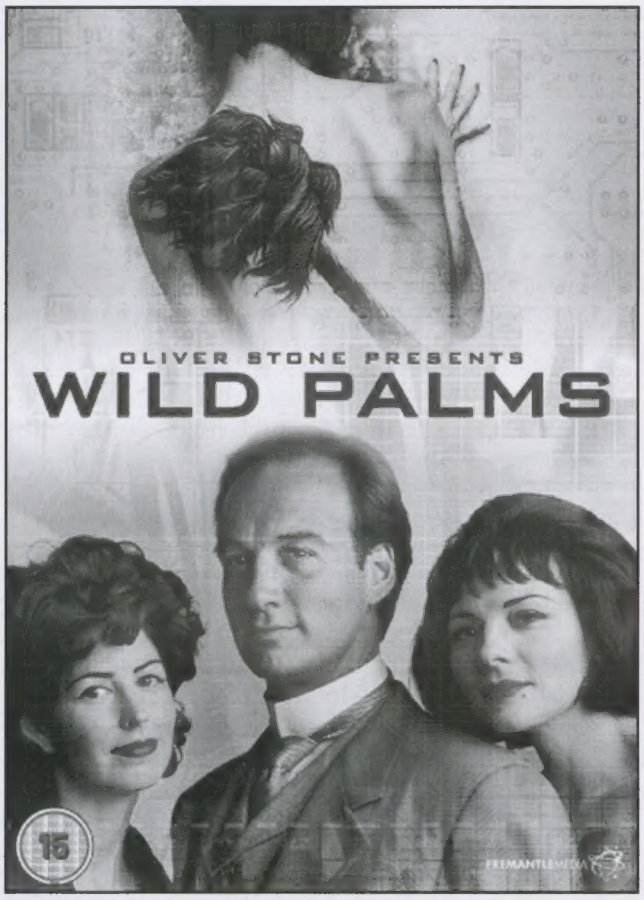
Directed by Terry Gilliam, **The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen** (1988) is one of the top five 'fantasy' movies of all time. A 20th anniversary edition on blu-ray has a director's commentary, behind-the-scenes featurettes, and deleted scenes. Very often linked with both *Time Bandits* (1981) and *Brazil* (1985), several critical overviews of filmmaker Gilliam's work suggest *Munchausen* was the culmination of a loose trilogy, albeit one centred on advancing years of the protagonists (young Kevin; Sam Lowry; aged Munchausen), focusing on thematic resonance instead of narrative connections. Even if that bit of auteur theory seems irrelevant, this is actually the very best of those three 1980s' movies. Also eclipsing 1943 and 1962 versions of the Munchausen story, Gilliam's effort repays close study, as a colourful romp that shifts through space, and distorts time, to reach such inspired heights of imaginary dimensions that it plainly out-travels Sinbad and Gulliver. As the world's greatest liar, John Neville overcomes impossible odds as Munchausen, tricking his way out of public execution, coping with a lunatic king of the Moon (Robin Williams, off his trolley), escaping from the hell of Vulcan's forge, and ultimately defeating a whole Turkish army, and even Death itself.

The Baron and his motley of superhuman assistants (portrayed by Eric Idle, Charles McKeown, Winston Dennis, and Jack Purvis) all prove themselves braver than Jason and his Argonauts. While demonstrating such a fearless sense of humour, and astute recognition of absurdities in the human story, that collectively they manage to shake apart the foundations of Munchausen's own mythology. Any picture that survived its own box-office disaster to later attract a devoted cult following, gave perfectly-cast memorable roles to lovely Uma Thurman, and little Sarah Polley, and got a brilliantly deadpan comic turn from Oliver Reed, must be regarded as a genuinely classic movie, of whatever genre. Its grandly fantastical appeal is neatly summed up by the boastful yet endearing Baron's query: "You do believe me, don't you?" In answer to which, 10-year-old Polley's upstaging theatre-brat Sally replies: "I'm trying really hard!"

Ostensibly a spin-off anthology from *Masters Of Horror* show, **Masters Of Science Fiction** (2007), is plainly indifferent to recruiting any superb directors of SF cinema, makes only a feeble effort to adapt excellent works by last century's top genre writers, and settles instead for assembling moderately notable casts to perform overly familiar dramas, rife with the increasingly dated concerns of mid-20th century science fiction.

A Clean Escape adapts a John Kessel tale, and stars Judy Davis as the military shrink interrogating a supposedly amnesiac US president (Sam Waterston) about his part in the nuclear holocaust. Directed by Michael Tolkin (*Rapture*, *New Age*), *Jerry Was A Man* (based on a Heinlein story) boasts a witty Malcolm McDowell, and Anne Heche (*Psycho* remake), offering a nominally amusing satire on Huxley's *Brave New World*, which stumbles unavoidably into banal courtroom farce. UFO-invasion scenario *The Awakening*



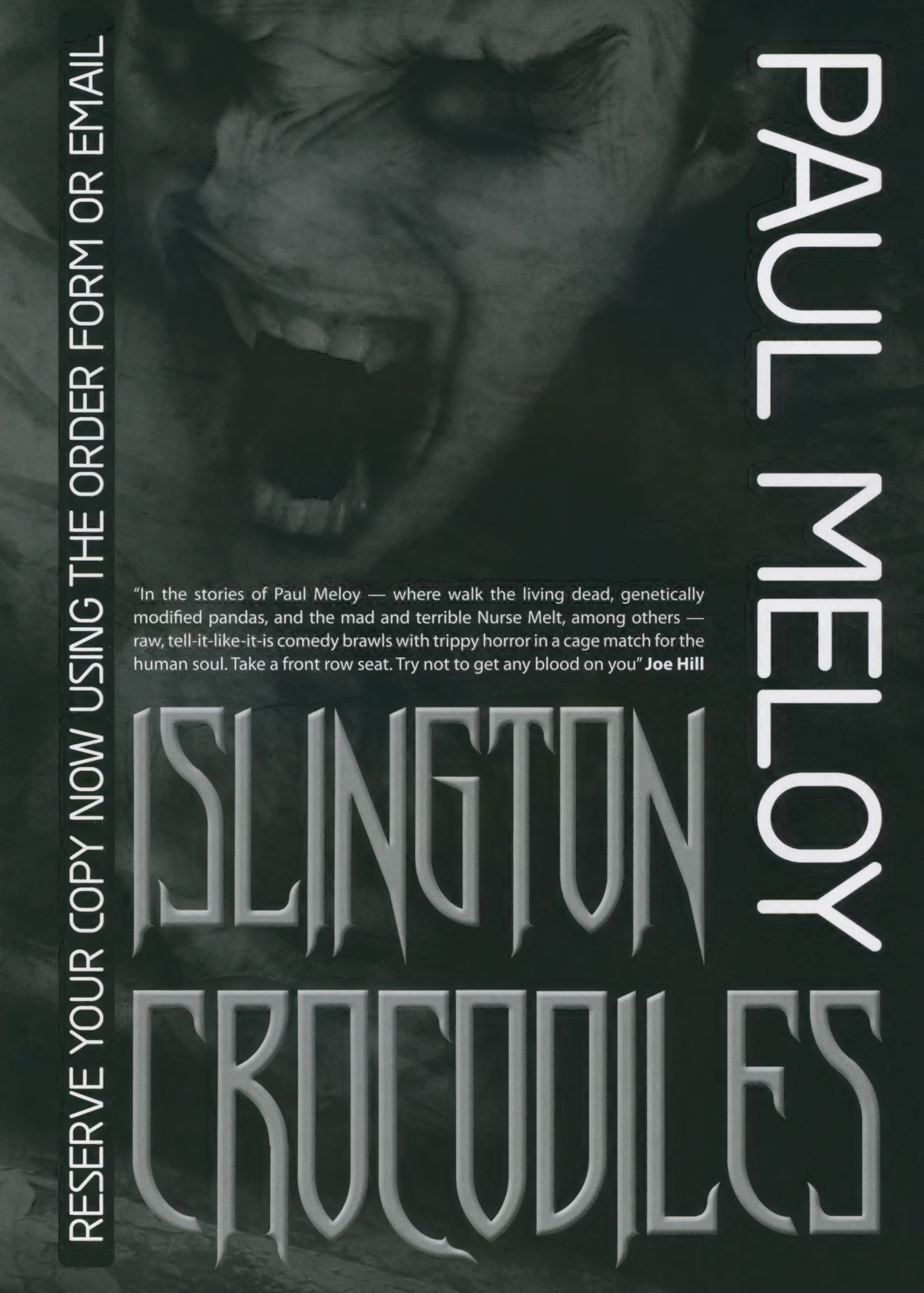


features Terry O'Quinn (*Harsh Realm*, *Lost*) exploring the popular cliché of narrowly avoided Armageddon (derived in this case from a story by Howard Fast), heralded by angel-styled CGI aliens hatching from a worldwide rain of cocoon-pods. Walter Mosley scripts his *Futureland* story into dystopian episode *Little Brother*, in which an escaped human slave is tried for murder, and eventually found 'guilty' by a cybernetic judge. J. Michael Straczynski adapts Robert Sheckley, and Harold Becker directs Sean Astin (*Lord Of The Rings*) and James Cromwell (*24*), in flying robo-cops technothriller *Watchbird*. Sentimental or awkwardly pretentious when it needs to be rational and ingenious, 'hosted' by Prof. Stephen Hawking (limited to just voiceover intros, of course), here's a measly 'season' of sci-fi telly that might well pass the time for genre completists but fails – quite spectacularly – to live up to its title. And yet it wraps on a grace note with Jonathan Frakes' tragic fable of prejudice *The Discarded*, co-scripted by Harlan Ellison from his own space opera, about an L5 gulag of mutant freaks, rejected by every colony in the Solar system. Starring John Hurt (*Alien*, *V For Vendetta*) and Brian Dennehy (*Cocoon*), this begins as black comedy in a habitat like a fleapit hotel crossed with an overgrown greenhouse, and profits from the sparks of hope and whimsically heroic fervour, that lead only to ultimate betrayal, shamelessly heartbreaking rejection, and the finale's resumption of starkly exiled human misery. So, this poignantly grotesque pantomime closes with chilling, gut-wrenching despair.

Who'd have imagined that the director of *Thunderbirds* (2004) could be so emotive?

Disaster drama **Jericho** (2006) is a TV series about a small Kansas town isolated by widespread nuclear attacks upon the USA. All the expected standard plotlines about misfit heroes, emergency fallout prep, random lawlessness, and scheming interlopers are here, along with a healthy dosage of human-interest stories. However, soap opera affairs drag it down, below the reach of SF concerns. Skeet Ulrich plays the prodigal son who arrives home shortly before mushroom clouds darken the horizon, icon of US motherhood Pamela Reed is the mayor's wife and matriarch-in-waiting, deceitful conspirator Hawkins (Lennie James, *Sahara*, *Snatch*) offers sensible advice but also withholds vital info, while glamorous guest-star Alicia Coppola essays the 'stranded outsider' as IRS auditor Mimi. Numerous folksy stereotypes make their presence felt: stupidly antagonistic bullies, laughably gracious co-operators, myopic opportunists, and bigoted wastrels. Romanticised narratives merge sporadic thrills from *Red Dawn* (1984), the survivalists' agenda of Stephen King's sentimental *The Stand* (1994), and the sinister mysteries of J.J. Abrams' *Lost* (2004). However, since the finest versions of this resolutely non-technical and decidedly unspectacular, if gloomily holocaustic, scenario appeared decades ago – Lynne Littman's harrowing *Testament* (1983), and Steve De Jarnatt's *Miracle Mile* (1988), covering after/before a grim apocalypse – SF fans might wonder why programme makers are bothering with this again? The ready answer: prime timeslot-filling mulch, with character-driven sweep and conservative plot intrigues, still hooks networks. This show is watchable, yet hardly compelling or unmissable. Ray Milland's classic road-movie chiller *Panic In The Year Zero* (1968) was more directly honest with its stark depiction of societal breakdown, and strong British efforts like Mick Jackson's shocking *Threads* (1984), and animated feature *When The Wind Blows* (1986), had savagely emotional impact regarding the world's 'unthinkable' fate, supporting filmmakers' conviction of how 'civilisation' and fragile morality would collapse rapidly after H-bomb strikes. Playing a local heavy, James Remar lends much needed grit to nefarious crime-gang activity but, as with so many TV roles for movie actors, his supporting character lacks sufficient development to make a lasting impression. Later episodes derail the protect-and-survive story-arc, lapsing into piecemeal flashbacks, which are broadly imitative of *24*-style undercover agent shenanigans, at best, or excruciatingly dull father-and-son quarrels, at worst.

Set in 2007, Bruce Wagner's **Wild Palms** (1993) is a mini-series executive-produced by Oliver Stone, with five episodes directed by Peter Hewitt, Keith Gordon, Kathryn Bigelow, and Phil Joanou. As the new president of a global corporation promoting 3D interactive home entertainment, Harry (James Belushi) finds himself overwhelmed by unscrupulous political forces, betrayed by his friends, and implicated in homicide. With its first-rate ensemble cast – including Robert Loggia, Angie Dickinson, David Warner, Kim Cattrall, Brad Dourif, Dana Delany, Nick Mancuso, and Robert Morse, and a guest spot with William Gibson (as himself) – this futuristic drama/paranoid thriller about a media cult manipulating their virtual reality system into a working mind-control device was quite a tantalising prospect fifteen years ago. Unfortunately, its transition from Wagner's satirical comicbook pages to commercial TV proved rather unsatisfying, although not entirely unrewarding, to fans of Philip K. Dick. Splashes of stylish glamour, Edwardian retro-fashions, striking visual effects, and unforgettable surreal elements (the rhino in an empty swimming pool), collide with iffy science for the VR tech and the series' overly convoluted plotting. Although it remains a sturdy platform for clever dialogues and remarkably operatic moments, the show's contrast with actual 21st century reality means it's surprisingly dated in sci-fi tone and overall credibility. And, now as then, it pales almost to insignificance when viewed alongside McGoohan's classic *The Prisoner*. **Tony Lee**


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